The Hudson Review

Spring 1995 $7 • $9 Can. • £5

Bruce Bawer
Violated by Ideas

Joseph Epstein
Elizabeth Bishop: Never a Bridesmaid

Carl Pfluger
Progress, Irony and Human Sacrifice

William H. Pritchard
Appreciating Kingsley Amis

James W. Tuttleton
Getting to Know Edith

POEMS BY John Haines, Nina Bogin, D. Nurkse, Mairi MacInnes, Suzanne Rhodenbaugh, William Baer

LETTER FROM ENGLAND BY John Greening

REVIEWS BY R.S. Gwynn, Tom Wilhelmus, Dean Flower, Marcia B. Siegel, Mark Jarman

0 73361 64805 1 51

A magazine of literature and the arts

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PITTSBURGH
Poetry Series

Photo: Leonard L. Greif, Jr.

Red Under the Skin
Natasha Sajé

Winner of the 1993
Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize

"Intelligence flashes, winks, gleams and dances everywhere in this book, along with human compassion, full and precise sensuousness, an acknowledgment of appetite, and a knowledge of history."
—Alicia Ostriker *$10.95 paper*

Photo: Austin Chick

Some Are Drowning
Reginald Shepherd

Winner of the 1993 Associated Writing Programs' Award Series in Poetry
Selected by Carolyn Forché

This first collection of poems enacts the struggle of a young black gay man in his search for identity. Many voices haunt these poems: black and white, male and female, the oppressor's voice as well as the oppressed. The poet's aim, finally, is to rescue some portion of the drowned and the drowning.
$10.95 paper

Photo: Margaret Wallace

Time's Fancy
Ronald Wallace

"Wallace has an inventive and witty imagination which takes him into all sorts of surprising directions. His work is not only sure in its craftsmanship, but humanly important in its subject matter and treatment. Best of all, it is exuberantly alive."
—Lisel Mueller.
"His poems ring with validity."—Richard Hugo *$10.95 paper*

Available at local bookstores, or

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH PRESS

c/o CUP Services, Box 6525, Ithaca, NY 14851 800-666-2211

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

COMING THIS SPRING

ANTHONY POWELL'S UNIVERSALLY ACCLAIMED EPIC IS AVAILABLE AGAIN IN FOUR EXQUISITE PAPERBACKS.

A dance to the music of time

ANTHONY POWELL

"A book which creates a world and explores it in depth, which creates brilliantly living and diverse characters and then watches them grow and change in their milieu. . . . Powell's world is as large and complex as Proust's."
—Elizabeth Janeway, *New York Times*

"One of the most important works of fiction since the Second World War. . . . A vastly entertaining, deeply melancholy, yet somewhat courageous statement about human experience."—Naomi Bliven, *New Yorker*

"Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time* moves like a delicate and fantastic minuet."—*Atlantic*

First Movement: $17.95 728 pages
Second Movement: $17.95 734 pages
Third Movement: $17.95 724 pages
Fourth Movement: $18.95 792 pages

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
5801 South Ellis Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60637

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

VOLUME XLVIII NUMBER 1 SPRING 1995

ESSAYS

Violated by Ideas: Reflections on Literature in an Age of Identity Politics — BRUCE BAWER — 19

Elizabeth Bishop: Never a Bridesmaid — JOSEPH EPSTEIN — 34

Progress, Irony and Human Sacrifice — CARL PFLUGER — 67

POETRY

The Ancestors; Rodin: The Gates of Hell; Clouds at 30,000 Feet — JOHN HAINES — 53

Seven Hawks; The Orchards of Vandoncourt; Let's Share the Frugal Meal; There's No Hour; Stockholm, Summer 1990 — NINA BOGIN — 57

The Ghostwriter — MAIRI MACINNES — 64

Peace after Long Sickness; Crossing the Ark Mountains — D. NURKSE — 93

The Cuban Girl — WILLIAM BAER — 96

Preparing for Immortality — SUZANNE RHODENBAUGH — 97

Two Snakes — BARBARA HELFGOTT HYETT — 99

Ozymandias III — JIM HENLEY — 100

CHRONICLES

Dance — MARCIA B. SIEGEL — 101

Revivals as forgeries

Theatre — RICHARD HORNBY — 108

"Sunset Boulevard," "The Glass Menagerie," "Vita and Virginia"

Art — JOHN LOUGHERY — 115

"Black Male" at the Whitney; "The Italian Metamorphosis" at the Guggenheim

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Film — BERT CARDULLO — 121
"Schindler's List"

REVIEWS

Getting to Know Edith — JAMES W. TUTTLETON — 129
Some important new books on Edith Wharton

Appreciating Kingsley Amis — WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD — 137
The author of "Lucky Jim" continues to turn out exciting work

Ranches of Isolation — TOM WILHELMUS — 145
E. L. Doctorow, Edna O'Brien, Maxine Kumin, etc.

Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story — DEAN FLOWER — 153
"The Mystery to a Solution," by John T. Irwin

The Primal Storyteller — MARK JARMAN — 161
"Dreaming and Storytelling," by Bert O. States

Make the World Cohere — R. S. GWYNN — 166
Thom Gunn, Jorie Graham, and Robert Phillips

COMMENT

Letter from England — JOHN GREENING — 6

LETTER TO THE EDITORS — 175

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS — 176

TO OUR READERS

A new book by an Advisory Editor and another edited by a Contributing Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW have recently been published. In accordance with our policy, they will not be reviewed in these pages, but are listed below for the interest of our readers:

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD: *Playing It by Ear: Literary Essays and Reviews.* University of Massachusetts Press. $45.00; $16.95.

JOHN LOUGHERY, ed.: *Into the Widening World: International Coming-of-Age Stories.* Persea Books. $11.95p.

Publication of this issue of THE HUDSON REVIEW is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal Agency, and by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts. We wish to express our appreciation to these organizations for their generosity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

EDITORS: Paula Deitz, Frederick Morgan

MANAGING EDITOR: Ronald Koury

ASSISTANT EDITOR: Nicholas Cheonis

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT: Sarah M. Bright

ADVISORY EDITORS: Hayden Carruth, William H. Pritchard, Frederick Brown, Sonya Rudikoff, Dean Flower, Emily Grosholz, Dana Gioia, Gary Krist

ASSOCIATE: Vincent M. Macchia

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS: Marcia B. Siegel *(Dance)*, Robert S. Clark *(Music)*, Richard Hornby *(Theatre)*, Bert Cardullo *(Film)*, John Loughery *(Art)*

THE HUDSON REVIEW is published quarterly by The Hudson Review, Inc., 684 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10021. It is indexed in the Social Sciences and Humanities Index and in the American Humanities Index. Book reviews are indexed in Book Review Index, and poems in Index of American Periodical Verse.

Individual subscription $24.00 per year in U. S.; foreign including Canada $28.00. Single copy $7.00. Special rate for bulk orders. U. S. A. Newsstand Distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 2020 Superior Street, Sandusky, Ohio 44870. Telephone orders for retail and wholesale distribution: 1-800-221-3148. Library subscriptions in England: Periodicals Division, B. H. Blackwell Ltd., P. O. Box 40, Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford. Back issues and reprints of Volumes I—XLVI available from AMS Press, Inc., 56 East 13th Street, New York, N. Y. 10003. Microfilms of Volumes I—XLVI available from University Microfilms, Inc., 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106. We handle directly all requests for permission to photocopy.

We urge individual and library subscribers to inform us promptly of address changes to insure the continuity of their subscriptions. Claims for missing issues will not be considered after six months from date of publication. We regret that we cannot provide refunds on canceled subscriptions.

Unsolicited mss will be read according to the following schedule: *Nonfiction*: January 1 through March 31, and October 1 through December 31; *Poetry*: April 1 through September 30; *Fiction*: June 1 through November 30. Unsolicited mss received at other times will be returned unread. Manuscripts submitted by subscribers who so identify themselves will be read throughout the year. Manuscripts will not be returned nor will inquiries be answered unless accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. No responsibility is assumed for their loss or injury.

Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Editors.

Printed in the United States of America. Second Class postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to THE HUDSON REVIEW, 684 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10021. Registered U. S. Patent Office.

Copyright © 1995 by The Hudson Review, Inc. ISSN 0018-702X

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DOSTOEVSKY

The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871

Joseph Frank

This long-awaited volume, the fourth of five planned in Joseph Frank's widely acclaimed biography of Dostoevsky, does cover a truly miraculous period of his life—the six most remarkably productive years in the great novelist's entire career. It was in this short span of time that Dostoevsky produced three of his greatest novels—*Crime and Punishment, The Idiot,* and *The Devils*—and two of his best novellas, *The Gambler* and *The Eternal Husband.*

This latest installment is as beautifully written, and as magisterial in scope, as its award-winning predecessors.

Cloth: $35.00 ISBN 0-691-04364-7

"One of the finest achievements of American literary scholarship."—Renée Wellek, *Washington Post Book World*

"Mr. Frank is clearly on the way toward composing one of the great literary biographies of the age."—Irving Howe, *New York Times Book Review*

On the Laws of the Poetic Art

Anthony Hecht

In six engaging lectures, the eminent poet Anthony Hecht explores the art of poetry and its relation to the other fine arts. While the problems he treats entail both philosophic and theoretical discussion, he never allows abstract speculation to overshadow his respect for and delight in the written texts that he introduces—or in the specific examples of painting and music to which he refers.

The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts: Bollingen Series

7 color illustrations. 47 halftones.

Cloth: $24.95 ISBN 0-691-04363-9

"Anthony Hecht is very much our poet-critic now, even as John Crowe Ransom and W. H. Auden were in previous generations. His *On the Laws of the Poetic Art* is civilized and superb criticism of the higher relations between poetry and the other arts, and is particularly valuable in this dark time, when barbarism and politics threaten all the arts."—Harold Bloom

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

AVAILABLE AT FINE BOOKSTORES OR DIRECTLY FROM THE PUBLISHER: 800-777-4726

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Comment:

Letter from England

DEAR H,

Crossing the Atlantic is a chancy business at the best of times. When it comes to literary reputations, the survival rate seems to be as random as that of barrels over Niagara Falls. Of course, it has always helped if—like Dylan Thomas—you could come keg-full of orotundity; it has helped even more if—as with Auden just now—you suddenly find your work featuring in an unexpected transatlantic hit like *Four Weddings and a Funeral.* And then there is the highly unpredictable effect of notoriety: what one might call the "Frankenstein factor" that portrays Ted Hughes not as an extraordinary nature poet, but as creator and destroyer of a feminist heroine.

With this in mind, and remembering how much in the end depends on one poet's championing of another's work (look what Lowell did for Larkin), I thought that I would focus here on three British writers, little known outside these islands. Indeed, two of them have yet to receive the kind of attention that they deserve in their own country. But all have been in the British news lately.

First, to one of the loveliest corners of England: the Malvern Hills in Worchestershire. I spent a holiday there last spring, ostensibly to explore some of the places associated with Edward Elgar (Elgar's mother was a Greening, and I like to tell myself that there is a family connection somewhere), but my visit turned into much more of a literary affair than I had anticipated. The area is steeped in poetry. William Langland, walking in the Malverns one summer's day in the fourteenth century, imagined "a fair feeld ful of folk" and so helped begin English literature. The town of Ledbury, near where I stayed, is not only the birthplace of John Masefield (Poet Laureate before Day Lewis, Betjeman and Hughes) but also the spot that the author of "Funeral Blues" selected to marry Thomas Mann's daughter Erika, so that she could get hold of a British passport: "I didn't see her till the ceremony and perhaps I shall never see her again," Auden wrote to Stephen Spender. "But she is very nice." All this was enough of a distraction from Elgar, but what really caught my attention was a few miles outside the town: a little tumble-down cottage—black and white timber frame, open beams, brick floor—set back from a winding high-hedged lane in the middle of lush agricultural land. This was Little Iddens.

It was here that Robert Frost came in 1914, at the invitation of two of the Georgian "Dymock Poets," to live in congenial pastoral sur-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEW DIRECTIONS BOOKS
SPRING 1995

GUY DAVENPORT
7 GREEKS. New translations of Archilochos, Sappho, Alkman, Herakleitos, Diogenes, Anakreon, and Herondas. $16.95 paperbook original. June.

SHUSAKU ENDO
DEEP RIVER. Tr. by V. C. Gessel. Japan's great Catholic writer's latest novel. "A profoundly compassionate work." —Martin Scorsese. $19.95. April.

CARADOC EVANS
NOTHING TO PAY. Afterword by John Harris. A ruthless portrayal of turn-of-the-century Wales. *A Revived Modern Classic.* $11.95 pbk. June.

GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI
IN A HOTEL GARDEN. A provocative novel by the British writer, about a modern young Jewish woman coming to terms with the Holocaust. $9.95 pbk. orig. May.

DENISE LEVERTOV
TESSERAE. 27 memoirs chronicle the life of Denise Levertov, "a poet who may just be the finest writing in English today" (Kirkus). $17.95. April.

THOMAS MERTON
THOUGHTS ON THE EAST. Intro. by George Woodcock. Short definitive passages by the well-known Catholic on Asian religions. *Bibelot.* $6.00 pbk. June.

MICHAEL PALMER
AT PASSAGES. New avant-garde poetry by "one of the most influential writers of recent years" (Village *Voice Lit. Supplement*). $11.95 pbk. orig. April.

STEVIE SMITH
A VERY PLEASANT EVENING. Selected Shorter Prose. The best of the much-loved British poet's very funny, charming prose. $8.95 pbk. June.

GUSTAF SOBIN
BREATHS' BURIALS. New poetry by a leading postmodernist, "a landscape artist whose terrain is language" (Village Voice Lit. Supplement). $11.95 pbk. orig. May.

MURIEL SPARK
THE ABBESS OF CREWE. A Modern Morality Tale. A spare and elegant fable of intrigue by the author of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brody. Bibelot.* $6.00 pbk. May.

UWE TIMM
THE INVENTION OF CURRIED SAUSAGE. Tr. by Leila Vennewitz. An ingenious tale about a German deserter in 1945, just before the war's end. $19.95. May.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS
PATERSON. Ed. by C. MacGowan. A masterpiece of modern American poetry meticulously reedited with a wealth of notes. $11.95 pbk. April.

Please send for complete catalog

NEW DIRECTIONS 80 Eighth Avenue, NYC 10011

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

roundings for a rent equivalent to $50 a year. Most remarkably, here in this idyll of Englishness he composed many of his most quintessentially American poems: "Birches," certainly; perhaps even "The Road Not Taken" . . . But while this was to be an epoch for American poetry, Frost's presence was also to prove a decisive influence on the development of English poetic taste. Little Iddens was a few hundred yards from another cottage where the reviewer and travel writer Edward Thomas lived: the "E.T." of Frost's poem "I slumbered with your poems on my breast . . ." If ever there was a moment in literature when two paths converged and "made all the difference," it was here at the start of the First World War. Walking the footpaths with his new friend, Frost suggested that much of what Thomas had published as lyrical nature writing about the English countryside was three-quarters of the way to being poetry. If he were to put it into loose blank verse and make a few small changes . . .

So began one of the briefest, yet most enduring, creative periods of any English poet. Thomas' entire oeuvre is what he wrote between 1914 and the day he died during the Battle of Arras in 1917. The combination of Frost's advice and the liberation from family pressures and hackwork that came when he joined the Army, stirred something—verse that eighty years later still has the fresh simplicity of the first aconites. When Frost arrived in England he took as an omen a headline in the papers about a frost-bound England. Ironic, then, that he should have caused such a wonderful thaw in E.T.:

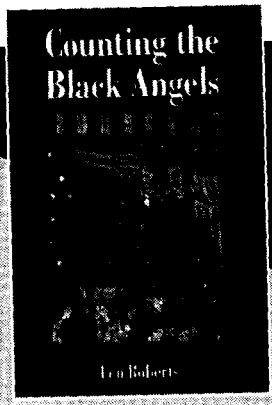
> Over the land freckled with snow half-thawed
> The speculating rooks at their nests cawed
> And saw from elm-tops, delicate as flower of grass,
> What we below could not see, Winter pass.
>
> "Thaw"

For years his work was lost in the dazzle of Modernism . . . but as Larkin and then the young Andrew Motion encouraged us to look again at the Georgians, it became apparent that something of nature had survived the ice age.

I suspect that if Edward Thomas is read at all outside Britain, it is because of the secret ministry performed by his American friend. I picked up a first edition of Thomas' first *Collected Poems* for $8 in a secondhand bookshop in Lambertville, N.J. a couple of years ago. Presumably somebody reading of "E.T." in *New Hampshire* had wondered what kind of verse this man wrote. He would have discovered that he refers to Frost, not by name, but as a kindred spirit:

> The sun used to shine while we two walked
> Slowly together, paused and started
> Again, and sometimes mused, sometimes talked
> As either pleased, and cheerfully parted

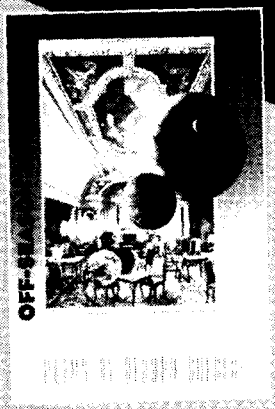
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Counting the Black Angels

Poems by Len Roberts

Paper, $12.95



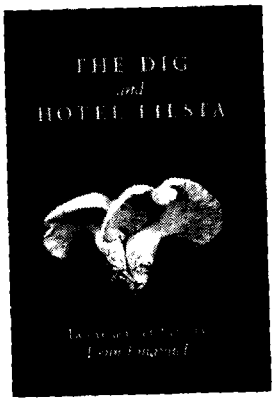
Off-Season at the Edge of the World

Poems by Debora Greger

Greger's fourth collection finds Ovid in Provincetown, a right whale in Iowa, and Cleopatra in the afterworld. Her poems invite the past into the present where even the Holiday Inn plays a role in the theory of evolution.

Supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts

Paper, $12.95



The Dig and Hotel Fiesta

Lynn Emanuel

Brings together for the first time the work Gerald Stern has called "sad, mysterious, brave, a little terrifying." The double volume reveals Emanuel exploring and sparring with history, remembrance and, especially in the new preface, issues of representation and cultural politics.

Paper, $13.95

At your favorite local bookstore
or call toll-free 800/545-4703

Illinois

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS • 1325 South Oak Street • Champaign, IL 61820

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Each night. We never disagreed
Which gate to rest on. The to be
And the late past we gave small heed.
We turned from men or poetry

To rumours of the war remote
Only till both stood disinclined
For aught but the yellow flavorous coat
Of an apple wasps had undermined . . .
"The Sun Used to Shine"

Goodness knows how much that *Collected Poems* would sell for here. In New Jersey, it had passed unnoticed.

The Frost/Thomas connection has been on our minds here lately, because Little Iddens came on the market and there was an unsuccessful attempt by the Friends of the Dymock Poets to "save it for the nation." I think it was probably the first time that many people realized it even existed. Now the property is in private hands and anything might happen to it. But meanwhile, there is a new book about the poets who gathered in this area: *The Dymock Poets* by Sean Street, published by Seren Books (First Floor, 2 Wyndham Street, Bridgend CF31 1EF, U.K.), which is lucidly written, with plenty of quotation, a selection of photographs and a wealth of fascinating background to the period. If some of the poetry of the time seems lukewarm, it only serves to remind us just how good Frost and Thomas were, each distilling from the speech rhythms familiar to him a poetry at once earthy with feeling and light with thought:

Yes, I remember Adlestrop—
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop—only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.
"Adlestrop"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We believe there is no greater honor
than to be awarded a prize
by a jury of one's peers."

The 1995 Poets' Prize Winner

AFTER THE RAIN

JARED CARTER

1995 Poets' Prize Finalists

Collected Longer Poems by Hayden Carruth
The Museum of Clear Ideas by Donald Hall
Otherwise by Eleanor Wilner

The Poets' Prize of $3,000 is awarded annually to the best book of verse published by an American citizen during the preceding year. The prize is jointly funded by the Nicholas Roerich Museum and the following twenty poets, who constitute the committee of judges:

Dick Allen
Toi Derricotte
Lynn Emanuel
Carol Frost
Dana Gioia
Emily Grosholz
Marilyn Hacker
Andrew Hudgins
Colette Inez
Mark Jarman
Ted Kooser
Margaret Lally
Philip Levine
Thomas Lynch
David Mason
Robert McDowell
Frederick Morgan
Louis Simpson
Henry Taylor
Michael Waters

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The station of Adlestrop has gone with the branch line it served, but you can still find the old platform nameplate hung inside the village bus shelter. There is a fascination about places immortalized by poems just as there is about places where poets have gathered. My next-door neighbors last week returned from a holiday in California and informed me that they were staying in a place called Carmel. "Old Rocky Face!" I almost retorted. Ever since Dana Gioia's enticing introduction to Robinson Jeffers in *Can Poetry Matter?*, I have longed to visit Carmel and see the house he built with his own hands. Popular as he is in the States (popular enough, it would appear, to be overlooked by the colleges), Jeffers was pretty well unavailable here for many years and even now we get him confused with E.A. Robinson or that other Robinson invented by Weldon Kees. But it occurred to me that we have our own West Coast poet, similarly popular with nonacademic readers, disdained by the universities, and largely unexported. He wrote a poem called "Do You Remember Adlestrop?," in which he wonders who asked Edward Thomas the question that sparked his most famous poem, wishing sadly, perhaps prophetically that someone would find the right question to put to him: "The questions come, / Blunt and bullying as a bad conscience, / But always the wrong ones . . ."

Norman Nicholson did not build his house on the rock: the introduction to his *Collected Poems* (Faber, $29.95) tells us that he spent virtually his entire life in "a few cramped little rooms behind a shop-front in a narrow terraced street." Nor was he a sub-Lawrentian misanthrope: indeed, he professed to be a Christian and seemed genuinely to love—or at least love studying—his fellow man. Jeffers and Nicholson approach poetry from opposite sides: Nicholson much more conscious of the inner life of words, less drawn by their rhetorical effect. What they do share is a concern for ecological and environmental issues. Nicholson in particular writes about the decline of traditional industrial communities and the ominous rise of nuclear power. But essentially his is that rare thing—a hopeful vision.

I suspect that Nicholson once had something of a reputation among American poets: his very first publication was in *Poetry* (Chicago) in 1938. I even salvaged a Twayne's guide to his work from—not Lambertville this time, but of all places, a high school library in Somerset County, N.J., where it was being discarded (there was of course no edition of his actual poetry available). Philip Gardner's volume has proved invaluable to my proselytizing, so little has been written about this fine poet. Because he chose to see the world in a very particular grain of sand, critics have dismissed him as a mere provincial. You will not find him in many representative anthologies, except one titled *The New Lake Poets* . . . Norman Nicholson made the mistake of being born in the Lake District and of following in the footsteps of Wordsworth. Literally so in his "To the River Duddon," where he reminds us what both poets have known:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

July 18–30, 1995
The University of the South
Sewanee, Tennessee

Workshops in Poetry, Fiction, and Playwriting.

Russell Banks	*Mary Flinn*	*Romulus Linney*
James Gordon Bennett	*Horton Foote*	*Charles Martin*
Anne Borchardt	*Peter Franklin*	*Alice McDermott*
Georges Borchardt	*David Godine*	*Robert McDowell*
Bobbie Bristol	*Brooks Haxton*	*Tim O'Brien*
Kent Brown	*Anthony Hecht*	*Francine Prose*
Michael Carlisle	*Gail Hochman*	*Robert Richman*
John Casey	*John Hollander*	*Lois Rosenthal*
Peter Davison	*Ann Hood*	*Mary Jo Salter*
Ellen Douglas	*Andrew Hudgins*	*Monroe Spears*
Stanley Elkin	*John T. Irwin*	*Stephen Wright*

Fellowships and Scholarships available.

Director: Wyatt Prunty

For information write or call:
Cheri Peters, Conference Administrator
Sewanee Writers' Conference
310D St. Luke's Hall • 735 University Avenue
Sewanee, TN 37383-1000
(615) 598-1141

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

. . . beneath mutation of year and season,
Flood and drought, frost and fire and thunder,
The blossom on the rowan and the reddening of the berries . . .
There stands the base and root of the living rock,
Thirty thousand feet of solid Cumberland.

The English academy is innately suspicious of writers who attach themselves too enthusiastically to a particular region, and especially when there is a "Private Property. W.W." notice on the gate. Yet N.N. has as much a claim to the territory. He was born there in 1914 (the year that Edward Thomas started writing poetry), educated in the area and then fell victim to tuberculosis, which confined him to bed for many months, but had a decisive effect on his choice of career. He discovered T.S. Eliot not long before Eliot discovered him, writing: "It was Mr Eliot . . . who made us aware of the meadow behind the muck-heap, who pointed out the significance of the dilapidated school and the empty church on the hill . . . suddenly everything in our world had its meaning. The most disparate events and objects took on a new relation to each other, becoming allegorical while remaining themselves." He went on to publish five volumes of poetry with Faber up to his death in 1987. It has taken this long for a *Collected Poems* to appear, but at last we can see in Neil Curry's edition the sweep from densely religious, deeply rooted, rather formal early lyrics, through an eighteen-year silence when he wrote only prose, to the wonderful late free-flowering brought on by a reading of Lowell's *Life Studies*: "I'd written about the rocks and the mines," he said, "but I hadn't written about my family. And that was the book which switched me from the town to the inhabitants . . ."

If Lowell is a surprising influence, Wordsworth is the obvious one; yet really this is another world from that of his predecessor. Compare, for example, "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" with Nicholson's "Five Minutes":

'I'm having five minutes', he said,
Fitting the shelter of the cobble wall
Over his shoulders like a cape. His head
Was wrapped in a cap as green
As the lichened stone he sat on. The winter wind
Whined in the ashes like a saw,
And thorn and briar shook their red
Badges of hip and haw;
The fields were white with smoke of blowing lime;
Rusty iron brackets of sorrel stood
In grass grey as the whiskers round an old dog's nose.
'Just five minutes', he said;

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> And the next day I heard that he was dead,
> Having five minutes to the end of time.

This is certainly not 1790s lyricism, yet it is recognizably a sonnet, with the sharp end where it should be. Wordsworth would not have approved of all the internal sound effects; but then the Industrial Revolution had only just begun, had not yet worked its way into the phonics of the language. The landscape, too, is not quite the silent pastoral idyll it was for Lucy (though her idyll was a lonely one): now the trees sound like "a saw," sorrel is "rusty iron brackets," the bushes are veterans, with "red / badges," and even the blowing lime dust brings overtones of death. Everything has changed since innocent Romantic eyes were bright, except the rock on which Cumbria is founded—and, of course, the local character preserved in sayings such as "I'm having five minutes." This is all the old man is remembered by. Other than that, he might as well be a stone in the wall he leant against. After all, it fitted him "like a cap." It is here that the two poems meet in spirit. Wordsworth's "mossy stone" with its retiring violet might be the very same that, two hundred years later, is described by Nicholson as "the lichened stone he sat on." In each case a death is involved. In Wordsworth's it is a premature one, and it has already happened. In Nicholson's, it is almost welcome, certainly imminent. Death is seen as part of the natural cycle of things, something intensely sad, yet gentle, something that can be understated to "Having five minutes to the end of time," a poignant conclusion whose jaunty whistling in the face of annihilation could be called a touch facile. Yet it is the end that makes the poem for Nicholson as for Wordsworth—in the latter's case, particularly through the use of the dramatic pause on "oh," and the strong iambic stress on "difference." Nicholson settles for a euphemism to evoke an age which thrives on euphemism, where the entire world might be annihilated after a "five minute" warning. No such planetary considerations for Wordsworth, although if we know his other Lucy poems we might recollect that the girl's fate is to be "rolled round in earth's diurnal course / With rocks and stones and trees."

While poets and critics argue over such minutiae, publishers have their own concerns. One recurring issue in the news here at the moment is the demise of the Net Book Agreement. This is an arrangement—dating back almost to the time of Wordsworth—which protects smaller bookshops and provides a very English "level playing field" for less popular authors and little presses. As things stand, if booksellers wish to promote this handsome new edition of Norman Nicholson by selling it at a discount, they may not do so. Books sold in the UK have a fixed retail price and that is that. Or would have been if certain major publishers had not decided to opt out. Now it looks as though the NBA is about to crumble. And will Norman Nicholson and all those other unread poets suddenly find their books

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

are star-studded window-fillers? No, it will be Jilly Cooper and Jeffrey Archer as usual.

All of which may well affect but is unlikely to interest my third writer. Indeed, I cannot imagine him showing any more than mild surprise at the fact that after decades as an eccentric poet and storyteller from the Orkney Islands, he was suddenly on the short list for the most prestigious literary prize in Britain: the Booker, with all its TV coverage and press speculation. George Mackay Brown claims only to have been to England once—and that for a mere hour. Thereafter he decided he had had enough. He lives in public housing on Orkney, close to where the composer Peter Maxwell Davies has also settled, and he writes almost exclusively from an Orcadian viewpoint on the most universal themes. Any familiarity with his work in the USA is likely to be through his many collaborations with Maxwell Davies, who seems to have suddenly become the Grand Old Man of English music, celebrating his sixtieth birthday this year with a Fifth Symphony and various other works. Even when not setting his texts, Brown's poetry has been a continual inspiration to the composer. Yet there are few stylistic similarities. "Max" writes gritty, impenetrable stuff, occasionally letting his hair down for a crowd-pleaser such as "Orkney Wedding with Sunrise" which winds up with a bagpiper skirling down the aisle. But Mackay Brown's work, though sometimes mysterious, is always accessible in tone: gentle, welcoming, yet unshakeable in its convictions (like Nicholson, essentially Christian) and utterly rooted in the real, if anachronistic, world of the Orcades. He loves lists, calendars, historical fragments, observed moments of truth, details picked from the shore:

> Monday I found a boot—
> Rust and salt leather.
> I gave it back to the sea, to dance in.
>
> Tuesday a spar of timber worth thirty bob.
> Next winter
> It will be a chair, a coffin, a bed.
>
> Wednesday a half can of Swedish spirits.
> I tilted my head.
> The shore was cold with mermaids and angels.
>
> Thursday I got nothing, seaweed,
> A whale bone,
> Wet feet and a loud cough.
>
> Friday I held a seaman's skull,
> Sand spilling from it
> The way time is told on kirkyard stones.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Saturday a barrel of sodden oranges.
A Spanish ship
Was wrecked last month at The Kame.

Sunday, for fear of the elders,
I sit on my bum.
What's heaven? A sea chest with a thousand gold coins.
"Beachcomber"

There is about his verse the genuine tang of Old Norse (the Orkneys have been almost more influenced by Iceland and Scandinavia than by Britain) particularly in his taste for riddles and runes and his complete faith in the power of narrative. It is this storytelling tradition which has brought Mackay Brown to the reading public's wider attention in his novel *Beside the Ocean of Time* (Bayeux Publishers, Calgary) which is as good as anything he has written. But the novels, plays, libretti, short stories and poems are very much part of the one Orkney Tapestry—title, incidentally, of the best introduction to his work.

The Songs of Spring are here and the Booker Ceremony has faded into mists and yellowing newsprint. George Mackay Brown did not attend, nor did he win the prize. It went to the Glaswegian James Kelman for his novel *How Late it was, How Late*, with its four thousand F-words. The Scots are enjoying something of a literary boom at present: in a recent promotion of twenty "New Generation" poets, seven were from north of the border. On National Poetry Day, however—which muscled in the week before the Booker—we were to be One Nation. Never mind that an Irish peace settlement was happening, The Day was not to be upstaged. United in verse from John O'Groats to Beeny Cliff, all traffic was to stop and form up in couplets, Civil Servants would cast their eyes towards Stratford-upon-Avon and the networks would broadcast wall-to-wall Geoffrey Hill . . .

It wasn't quite like that, although some of the happenings were crazier than anything my satirical touch could defuse. Ironically, the date chosen was the exact anniversary of the day that Little Iddens was auctioned and lost for lack of £39,000. That this happened perhaps says something about the public's general indifference to poets, alive or dead, this side or that side of the Atlantic. A state of affairs I hope this letter might have done a little to change.

JOHN GREENING

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

STORY LINE PRESS

The Independent Press for the Independent Mind

PROPHETS & PROFESSORS:

ESSAYS ON THE LIVES AND WORKS OF MODERN POETS

by BRUCE BAWER

"Bawer is one of the appallingly few American literary journalists whose work repays the reading; he is an intelligent, independent, tough-minded critic and a clear-eyed observer of literary affairs."

—Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post*

"Bawer has brains to burn." —*Vanity Fair*

270 pgs, 6 x 9, ISBN 1-885266-05-7 Cloth $26.95 / ISBN – 04-9 Paper $15.95

THE REVENGE BY LOVE

A BOOK OF POEMS by DAVID DOOLEY

"David Dooley's poetry is not like anybody else's: it is energetic, often long-lined and propulsive, with a headlong compelling rhythm."

—Donald Hall, *Harvard Review*

"David Dooley's accomplishment... bespeaks the confidence of a magician who gives away the secret even as he performs the trick, certain we will be dazzled anyway." —Allen Hoey

90 pgs, 51/2 x 81/2, ISBN 1-885266-06-5 Paper $11.95

WRITE OR CALL FOR A COMPLETE CATALOG:

STORY LINE PRESS
Three Oaks Farm
Brownsville, OR 97327-9718
tel (503) 466-5352 / fax (503) 466-3200

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BRUCE BAWER

Violated by Ideas: Reflections on Literature in an Age of Identity Politics

In a phrase that has since become famous, Lionel Trilling once wrote of "the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet." In recent years, as political ideas have played an increasingly large part in the creation, criticism, and consumption of literary works, that crossroads has gotten bloodier and bloodier. Four decades after the poet and critic Randall Jarrell complained that he was living in an Age of Criticism, American literature is passing through an Age of Identity Politics, when too many writers view themselves (and are viewed by others) as representatives of certain identity groups and as voices for those groups' collective complaints, and view literature, moreover, as an outpouring of group consciousness, an articulation of group solidarity, and a means to group empowerment. Not only is it inadvisable to assume, these days, that authors will be guided by literary impulses and critics by a lively appreciation for literary values; one can't even count on them to have any degree of respect for, or to have a very good idea of what it might mean to speak of, literary impulses and values.

To be sure, one must be careful not to apply the word "political" indiscriminately; what to one individual may look like an utterly abstract political issue may to another individual be a deeply personal matter. To write a realistic short story or novel about the lives of gay people, for instance, is to risk charges in some quarters of "politicization" of literature. Many authors, of course, answer the charge of politicization with the observation that *every* artwork has some kind of politics—that politics is an inevitable part of life and therefore of art. True:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

there is politics in everything from *Henry V* to *War and Peace*. Both Auden and Yeats, two of the century's most brilliant poets, wrote blatantly political poems. Yet if those poems survive, it is because they arose from some place deeper than the narrowly political level and have thus transcended the immediate political circumstances in which they were written.

As some thoughts lie too deep for tears, indeed, some lie far too deep for politics. Political truths are never the ultimate truths of any human life. Human experience is rich, messy, profound; an individual's politics is something tidier and more generalized that grows out of his or her experience but cannot begin to capture its essential truths. Politics is about one's relationship to formulated ideologies and to issues that have been reduced to a matter of this-side-or-that; literature, by contrast, has an intimate, intense relation to lived experience and involves a faithfulness not to any ideologically formulated view of reality but to reality itself in all its complexity and contradiction. Yes, art, like politics, involves a principle of order; but while art seeks to find order in its material, politics imposes it, bending reality to the artificial order of policy position and party platform. Art's order is inherently human; the order of politics is inherently systematic.

A work of literature may, of course, contain political opinions; but in a work with legitimate claim to artistic merit, those opinions have a more elliptical relation to the work's truth than they do in more politically tendentious writings. When T. S. Eliot famously remarked that Henry James had "a mind so fine that no idea could violate it," he was alluding to the distinction between the realm of mere ideas—which is to say, the realm of formulated (and often political) generalizations about experience—and that of imaginative creation. A true artist can sympathize as much with a fictional character whose politics differ from his own as he can with one who shares his views. Good poets, Yeats noted, are "full of uncertainty about everything but themselves, about everything that can be changed, about all that they merely think." Uncertainty may be too strong a word, but Yeats's basic point is valid, in fact vital: artistic imagination requires an openness to experience that rebels against strictly political thinking. Describing the artistic impulse as a spiritual experience, Yeats maintained that it is an

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

error "to continually mistake a philosophical idea for a spiritual experience. The very preoccupation of the intellect with the soul destroys that experience, for everywhere impressions are checked by opinion."

Impressions *vs.* opinions: the distinction is crucial to the creation and appreciation of art. Yet the ability of many writers and readers to recognize this distinction has eroded. More and more novels inhabit the realm of what Yeats called "opinion," and more and more readers expect novels to inhabit that realm and are likely to be confused or displeased when they do not. When many critics nowadays talk about "serious novels," they are likely to mean novels that seek to make political points; in particular, they often mean novels that seek to address the experience of a certain identity group. When confronted, moreover, with anything purporting to be a work of the imagination, their first impulse may be to categorize and celebrate it according to its creator's sex, race, class, sexual orientation, or HIV status. Actual literary criticism can have no place in such a way of thinking about literature, for if one pigeonholes works according to their authors' demographic categories and writes about them in those terms, the only appropriate response is not to evaluate frankly their success or failure at capturing common human emotions and at conveying a compelling vision of the human condition, but, rather, to express one's unequivocal gratitude to their authors for "sharing" heretofore "silenced voices" and providing windows on varieties of identity-group experience that one perceives as essentially alien to one's own.

Though there continue to be literary and critical journals whose editors appreciate aesthetic standards, to page through a few recent issues of some representative periodicals is to be struck by the persistent preoccupation with politics and group identity. When I dropped recently into one bookstore carrying a large selection of journals, the then current number of *The American Voice* was devoted to "Feminist Erotica." *Ploughshares* offered a special issue on Native American writers. *Caliban* opened with an interview in which LaDonna Harris of Americans for Indian Opportunity observed enthusiastically that "there were two giant world societies and now we've seen the collapse of one of them. That shows the potential of what can

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

happen here in the United States." Meanwhile, the tenor of *Boundary 2*'s opening interview with Oe Kenzaburo was exemplified by an interviewer's comments that "the primary landscape of Thomas Cole or Frederic Edwin Church . . . is meant to be the material embodiment of national power" and that "the Patriot missile is a sublimated image that represses reality." Featured in *Central Park* was Eve Ensler's "The Vagina Monologues," described as "a series of performance monologues in development" which are "loosely based on interviews with women about their vaginas." *Green Mountains Review* offered a special number on "Women, Community and Narrative Voice," while *Mid-American Review* contained a second installment of something called "The Women's Positions Forum," which in turn contained an essay on "ecofeminism" and other essays entitled "*Thelma and Louise*: A Feminist Fable" and "Seeds: A Meditation on the Body."

Indiana Review, meanwhile, featured an essay by Brent Strong complaining that editors tend to publish relatively tame AIDS poems epitomizing "avoidance" rather than the "rougher, talkier, angrier" poems composed in the author's AIDS poetry workshop. He hoped that "the future brings a greater willingness on the part of the reading public to listen to all kinds of poetic speech, even if it is rough around the edges because it issues from the pens of less experienced writers." Translation: poetry's chief aim is not artistry but directness of expression, to which artistry can in fact be an impediment. This view, though often unarticulated, is increasingly taken for granted by writers, readers, and publishers alike.

Typical of the sort of crude, easily grasped sociopolitical statement made by many poets these days is June Jordan's poem "Des Moines Iowa Rap," which begins: "So his wife and his daughters could qualify / Lester Williams told the people he was gonna try suicide: / suicide. / He promised the papers he would definitely try / so his wife and his babies could qualify for welfare / in the new year. / Welfare. / In the new year." Appearing in the same book as this work are pro-Nicaragua, anti-Klan, and anti-apartheid poems that are on the literary level of bumper stickers. (Also included, incidentally, is an acknowledgement of financial assistance to the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There is little in this poetry of slogans to distinguish it from the work of a hundred other poet-revolutionaries—such as, for example, Audre Lorde, whose entry in the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985) notes that she has "described herself as a 'black lesbian feminist warrior poet,' adding that 'when I say myself, I mean not only the Audre who inhabits my body but all those feisty, incorrigible black women who insist on standing up and saying "*I am* and you cannot wipe me out, no matter how irritating I am, how much you fear what I might represent."'" Yet Lorde herself has wiped those other women out by the very act of denying their individuality and calling them by her name.

The aforementioned anthology provides a good example of the absurd contemporary tendency to reduce literature to sociopolitical commentary and to judge it according to non-literary standards. Editors Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe Thomas Hardy as "addressing the problems of rural villages in England" and say that "Joseph Conrad provided one of the more scathing critiques of the European invasion of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*." To anyone who knows the work of these authors, such characterizations sound ludicrous; they seriously distort the nature of the novels and their authors' intentions. Furthermore, while Gilbert and Gubar accord only a few pages apiece to Edith Wharton, perhaps America's greatest novelist, and to Flannery O'Connor, perhaps our finest short-story writer in this century, they include entire novels by Kate Chopin and Toni Morrison, their reason plainly being that the works by these less accomplished writers are more compatible with the editors' brand of feminist politics than is anything by Wharton or O'Connor.

On Gay Pride Day 1994, channel-surfing past a gay-themed television show called "In the Life," I happened to hear a single sentence spoken by an African-American woman at a lectern. "Everything they do," she stridently told an unseen audience, "is grinding us into dust and we will not be ground." The woman, whom I did not recognize and whose audience I could not see and had no way of identifying, might well have been talking to a female audience about men, or to an African-American audience about whites; but since it was a gay show on Gay Pride Day, she was presumably speaking to a gay and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lesbian audience about heterosexuals. (Yet it is possible that she was addressing a somewhat different audience—say African-American lesbians—about a "them" consisting perhaps of all straights, all whites, and all males, or perhaps just of straight white males. These things can get complicated.)

This kind of self-righteous victimization rhetoric pervades the literary culture. It's become routine for some writers to refer to their group identity, and to those who share that identity, in ways that make them sound not like self-respecting artists (or like responsible citizens) but like cynical politicians canvassing for votes. Instead of challenging people both inside and outside their various identity groups to rise above their narrow, comfortable views of others and of themselves, and to embrace a vision of a more equitable society, they flatter those who share their identity-group labels, telling them what they want to hear (and nothing they haven't heard before) about their victimization; instead of addressing their readers' most serious and selfless instincts, instead of challenging their assumptions and encouraging discipline and direction, such writers tend to certify the more frivolous and ignoble aspects of people's group identities. What's more, they appease liberals who don't share their group identity but who feel virtuous about applauding their anger and who, truth be told, feel more comfortable with their reinforcement of minority-group marginality and "differentness" than with the notion of people in this or that group as fully equal and integrated members of mainstream society.

"I write as a woman, as a lesbian, as a feminist," declared the poet Adrienne Rich in a 1981 lecture. "I make no claim to be universal, neutral, or androgynous." Rich was applauded roundly for these remarks. By contrast, the dramatist Edward Albee told an audience recently that he wasn't a "gay writer"—he was a writer who happened to be gay. For making this distinction—the point of which, presumably, was that he sought in his work to speak to an audience of both gay and straight people about universal human experiences and emotions—he was booed by many of those in attendance. Rich's remarks reflect the core philosophy of those academic disciplines variously known as Black or African-American Studies, as Women's or Wimmen's Studies, and as Gay or Queer Studies; one

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

can also imagine some variation on them being spoken by such writers as the gay playwright Tony Kushner (whose grotesquely overpraised *Angels in America* is subtitled "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes") and the black woman novelist Alice Walker (whose 1992 novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, about a women who has had a clitoridectomy, is dedicated "With Tenderness and Respect to The Blameless Vulva").

To non-members of the groups for which these writers purport to speak, they say, in effect, "My people's lives are hell, and your people are entirely to blame"; to fellow group members, meanwhile, they offer a bullying embrace, as if to say, "I speak for you. Love my work or you're a traitor to your people." Such recent novels as Jess Mowry's *Six Out Seven* (about black youths), Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* and *Disappearing Acts* (about black women), and David B. Feinberg's *Eighty-Sixed* (about gay AIDS sufferers) all share a lax, shapeless, untextured quality; all appeal to a notion of multicultural diversity that seeks to intensify the polarization, the us-and-them mentality, that marks 1990s culture-war rhetoric. Typical of the perspective that informs many such works is Toni Morrison's observation that "For a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer *exclusively* ours. . . . So another form has to take its place." Her point: when black artworks start to appeal to non-blacks, it marks not achievement but failure. Her aim: not to encourage serious thought about the complex relationship between individual and group identity, but to reinforce the party line on that identity and to reiterate the victim-group rhetoric whose purpose is to bind the group together ideologically through shared rage, self-righteousness, and grievance.

Whom does literary groupthink serve? Well, for one thing, it serves the interests of a publishing business in which books are increasingly seen as products with specifically defined markets. Publishers now tend to prefer fiction that, like certain species of nonfiction, has a clearly defined audience to which it can be marketed. Some editors and agents, and even some publishing houses, specialize in particular identity groups (St. Martin's Press, for example, has an extensive gay list). Like today's movie producers, moreover, publishers increasingly prefer "high-concept" properties—novels with arresting, easily summarized

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

story lines that are preferably issue-oriented. True literature isn't often high-concept; identity-group novels often are.

But this ghettoization doesn't serve the cause of literature any more than it serves society's interest in meaningful interaction among individuals who happen to belong to different groups. Nor, for that matter, does it serve any particular group's ultimate interest. Doris Lessing's remark that many women writers and critics "have internalized the notion that they are inferior" and thus feel "that women should be permitted to write badly and should not be criticized for it" might be applied with equal legitimacy to members of other identity groups. Certainly the phenomenon she speaks of—the dissolution of all literary standards by some adherents of identity-group-centered discourse—is widespread today. So is the desire to impute literary merit to various non- or sub-literary documents by women, blacks, or Native Americans in order to make the canon more "diverse" and "representative." Yet as Mary Jo Salter has written apropos of this tendency in Women's Studies, "we can't have it both ways. We can't simultaneously espouse Woolf's line that women haven't until recently been allowed the depth of education and the scope of experience to become Shakespeare, while also claiming that we really have an abundance of Shakespeares or even Woolfs, if anybody would just take the time to read us." The same holds, of course, for other identity groups.

This is not to suggest that such terms as "women's experience" or "the black experience" or "the gay experience" are without meaning, or that literature that seeks to convey such experience is thereby necessarily compromised as art. On the contrary, such classic authors as Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* have written meritorious novels that have a special resonance for many black Americans; the same is true of Edmund White's *Forgetting Elena* for gay readers. In recent years—without politicizing, accusing, alienating, self-aggrandizing, or implicitly offering themselves up as spokespeople—such novelists as James Purdy, David Plante, and Robert Ferro have composed first-class fiction that, among other things, illuminates what may be described as the "gay experience," while the poet Molly Peacock and the novelist Alice McDermott have written per-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ceptively about "women's experience." The works of such authors, who tend to be insufficiently appreciated in our time, are primarily visions, not manifestos or statements or complaints; in speaking powerfully not only to identity-group members but to all readers, they may be best seen as foregrounding aspects of universal experience that have special reference to the shared experience of many members of a particular group, and as representing the hope for a vigorous common culture based on genuine literary standards. One might add that these authors' books, though often glowingly reviewed, rarely ride the wave of academic and publishing-house fascination with "special-interest" literature; so that while Toni Morrison wins the Nobel Prize, a writer like James Purdy goes for years without an American publisher.

It is not illegitimate, then, to speak of a distinctly female, black, Jewish, Native American, or gay literary voice (though one should do so with great care, and with the recognition that greatness is always a matter of individual distinction). Often, when reading an effective novel or poem by a woman, I will find myself thinking: *a man would never have seen this aspect of experience in quite this way, or written about it in quite this way*; yet though I am not a woman, I find myself responding very strongly to the work in question. In such cases, the difference in identity-group membership between author and reader makes for a sense not of alienation but of common humanity across demographic boundaries; it testifies not to the importance of those boundaries but to their frailty in the face of art. That's what literature is, or should be, all about: an ability to communicate a vision of human experience across cultural, ethnic, and sexual lines, to speak not only to "one's own kind" and one's own time but to the world and to the ages.

For this reason, it is perfectly legitimate to question the replacement of great books in the literary canon by inferior books whose writers belong to certain demographic groups, or to question government endowments that take into account the political messages of artworks or their creators' sex, ethnic background, or sexual orientation. Yet some critics go further than this, publicly exploiting the prejudice and philistinism of citizens who are suspicious of literary experiment, scandalized by sexual images, disgusted by the visibility of certain minori-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ties, and repelled by homosexuality. These critics routinely link literary questions with the political battles currently being waged over abortion, gay rights, unwed motherhood, crime, drugs, and so forth, and lump all these disparate conflicts together under the single rubric of "the culture war," as if Americans could be neatly divided into two groups, one consistently siding with conservatives on these issues and the other consistently opposing them. The extreme left also accepts the idea of a culture war, and the mainstream media, pleased to see life's complexities reduced to a clear-cut fight between colorful antagonists, embrace the whole business enthusiastically. So do a number of academics like University of Virginia professor James Davison Hunter, who in *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991) takes for granted that today's major conflicts can be understood as aspects of a confrontation between two camps, the "orthodox" and the "progressive," into one or the other of which every American neatly falls.

Yet, as Michael Lind wrote in a 1993 issue of *The National Interest*, "it seems rather strange that the diverse parties to aesthetic, moral, and political debates should consistently divide into the same two camps—Donkeys and Elephants." Adducing examples from history to remind us that "such neat symmetries rarely occurred in the past," Lind declares:"*There is no culture war in America.* The American people are not divided into two discrete camps, with modern artists, rock and rap musicians, homosexuals, divorcees, agnostics, performance artists, feminists, socialists, and (as Pat Robertson claims) devil-worshippers on one side, and classical violinists, Christians, heterosexuals, easel painters, and capitalists on the other. . . . A rigid linkage between aesthetic, moral, and political radicalism or conservatism is found only among small, intense, eccentric minorities at the fringes of American life." Precisely. One might add that this truth has been obscured by combatants on both fringes—by extreme leftist ideologues, because it suits their interest to depict all opposition to their politicization of arts and letters as motivated by reactionary politics and cultural philistinism, and by some conservatives, because it suits *their* interest to associate their own right-wing views, and in particular their defense of "traditional moral values," with the defense of high culture and aesthetic standards.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Make no mistake: there's something terribly wrong when a graduate student can be told by his faculty adviser that his dissertation topic isn't "relevant" because it has no political angle, when a critic writing an essay about a poet for a literary journal can be instructed to revise it because he hasn't made it sufficiently clear that the poet is gay, and when a literary awards committee can pause in its deliberations to investigate whether a potential winner is black. (All true stories.) Yet the hypocrisy of right-wing attacks on such absurdities has itself reached absurd levels. If criticism in left-oriented publications typically favors authors with the correct politics and/or identity-group credentials, critics on the right who condemn the philistinism of such approaches themselves routinely applaud works that exemplify right-wing philistinism. Likewise, just as some politicians who are poor examples of "family values" don't hesitate to champion those values loudly and aggressively, so those who have never read a serious book, and whose idea of culture is a night in front of the TV set, pretend to be devoted to the works of Plato, Dante, Milton, Kant, and other pillars of Western civilization and to be horrified by their replacement in university curricula by other works they've never read. Indeed, the word "politicization" has entered the critical vocabulary of politicians and political commentators whose animadversions on such matters are informed by something other than purely literary concerns. To say that a literary or artwork is "politicized" has, in other words, often come to mean simply that in the eyes of the accuser it has the *wrong* politics. Which, one might ask, is more absurd—an esoteric academic journal that devotes an entire issue to a theoretical analysis of some TV situation comedy, or a middlebrow magazine like *Reader's Digest* that publishes articles designed to get middlebrow readers incensed over the watering-down of a canon about which they don't know a thing? Such are the defining phenomena of the cultural moment in which we live.

For some of the most fervent soldiers in the so-called culture war, in short, that war isn't really about culture at all, but about politics and society. As part of that war, both right and left impose an ideologically charged way of thinking—a "Crossfire" mentality, one might call it, in which everything comes down to a matter of this-side-or-that—on a domain in which such

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thinking has no proper place. Things were not ever thus. Once upon a time, literature, music, and art were accorded positions of great honor; young people were brought up to regard them not as mere forms of entertainment or self-expression but as monuments of civilization—monuments that existed beyond the interests of the moment, and certainly beyond the temporal business of politics. Even in the 1930s, when leftist politics and proletarian culture were in the ascendant, the cultural pages of then-Stalinist publications like *The Nation* and *The New Republic* were, to a surprising extent, unswayed by political influences; likewise, in the 1940s and 1950s, the *Partisan Review*, that flagship of postwar leftism, rarely allowed political considerations to infect the rigorously aesthetic judgments passed down in its cultural essays. A notable example of midcentury attitudes toward the relationship between culture and politics is Ezra Pound's winning of the 1949 Bollingen Prize for his *Pisan Cantos*; though his anti-Semitism and wartime support for Hitler and Mussolini made the prize controversial, most major literary figures, while despising Pound's politics, defended the judges' decision. It is difficult to imagine such a thing happening now. These days, literary-prize controversy takes the form of the 1988 *New York Times Book Review* essay by Houston A. Baker and June Jordan that suggested, on no evidence whatsoever, that racism had deprived Toni Morrison of the National Book Award.

Admittedly, American writers have always been unusually conscious of their national identity, of their role in defining America and in developing American culture and society. What is America? What is the New Man? These questions have animated American writers from Irving to James to Fitzgerald to Mailer. Unlike other countries born before Marx, America was founded on an idea, and many ambitious American writers have considered it their duty to explore that idea and to observe and address explicitly the issues of the day through the lens of that idea. This practice has often weakened novels; yet such writers—from Saul Bellow to Thomas Pynchon—have been certified as important by the academy because they provide professors with stylistic and structural features aplenty to analyze and ideas to discuss. Americans have always been uncomfortable, moreover, with the idea of sheer literary merit;

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

we're a practical-minded people and want literature to serve a practical purpose. "Poetry makes nothing happen," wrote W.H. Auden, but Americans want literature to do exactly that; otherwise we tend to agree with Marianne Moore's observation about poetry that "there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle." One might add that there has always been among American cultural figures (men, anyway) a pronounced fear of the "feminine," a tendency to see art as a womanly pursuit and politics as manly, and thus to feel that conspicuous undigested political or intellectual content in a work of literature removes the distaff "sting." Ironically, in an age of women's liberation, some female writers have joined many of their male colleagues in retreating from the supposedly feminine realm of artistic imagination to the supposedly masculine domain of political rhetoric.

Yet in the late twentieth century politics have overwhelmed culture as never before in America. Signs of the times: the cover of the *Antioch Review*'s Spring 1994 issue displays the word WAR in huge letters (as an editor's note explains, the issue contains essays on "war's impact and its cultural implications"), while the *Michigan Quarterly Review*'s Spring issue features the words URBAN POVERTY RACIAL TENSIONS, also in huge letters. Both covers would seem to suggest that these real-life phenomena dwarf the literary considerations that are the traditional turf of such journals. How to explain this sea change? Part of the cause undoubtedly lies in the post-sixties left-wing view of high culture as elitist and of all varieties of discourse, whether they take the form of a Shakespeare sonnet or a soap-opera episode, as equally valid "cultural productions." Part may be attributed to post-sixties popular music, in which left-wing political posturing has played a major role, and part to the influence of Hollywood, which has long confused crude liberal message-mongering with artistic seriousness. Living, moreover, in an increasingly complex world marked by scientific and technological advances that are increasingly beyond most individuals' comprehension, and by rapid social and cultural changes that can often seem beyond human control, makes a lot of people more susceptible than they might otherwise be to guiding certainties in the form of rigid ideology.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Another reason is what Wallace Stevens called "the pressure of reality." News, including news of politics, is a huge presence in our daily lives. Stevens wrote that poetry is a product of "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality"; in our time reality has simply become too strong a pressure for some imaginations. And a further reason is the increasing academicization of literary creation and criticism. For many humanities professors nowadays, seriousness means politics. Yet the examples of such critics as Gore Vidal and the late Irving Howe—whose politics are radical socialist, but whose literary judgments are essentially apolitical—show that it is possible even for people with tendentious views about society and government to take aesthetic criteria seriously and to separate literary judgment from political conviction.

An additional factor is that we live in an age of advertising and publicity. Americans today are so accustomed to being sold things that a subway without ads or a talk-show guest without a movie to hawk can be for many people a source of puzzlement, if not discomfort. In this atmosphere, a novel that isn't pushing some kind of politics can produce similar reactions *("what's the point? what's he selling?")* and a novel in which ideas are examined as part of the fabric of life, rather than put forward on their own account, is also apt to be widely misunderstood. It is also an age superficially preoccupied with the self's satisfactions rather than with the deeper truths of character and society that great literature traditionally addresses. Salter quotes the feminist critic and novelist Carolyn Heilbrun to the effect that when one is a woman in this society, "one's own desires and quests are always secondary." This is essentially the plaint of some gay and black writers, too. Yet as Salter replies, "Is there a mature adult who honestly believes that he or she comes first? Even more to the point, has there ever been a mature, great poet of any stripe who did not seek access to something greater than him- or herself?" Alas, in these times the most extreme kind of identity-group thinking fails to distinguish between a reasonable desire for equal rights and for recognition of one's common humanity, on the one hand, and a rather immature refusal to recognize other people's problems and one's own responsibilities.

If words like "character" and "honor" sound old-fashioned

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

now, it is largely because they denote individual attributes in a time when it seems passé in many quarters to speak of individuals as if they had some responsibility for their own behavior instead of being the helpless victims of social circumstance and prejudice. Conservatives are right to argue that we now think altogether too much in terms of group identity. But this complaint needs to be balanced by the observation that people thought in terms of groups long before the rise of identity politics. In the days of restricted hotels, segregated lunch counters, and men's-only clubs, after all, the unwritten rules by which American society lived included a set of dictates about group-based rights and roles that were universally taken for granted. In trying to banish the inequitable habits of thought that are the legacy of those unjust times and to create a society in which we truly relate to one another as individuals, men and women of good will have necessarily had to give thought to those very group divisions on which prejudices were based—have had, that is, to ask ourselves exactly *how* we have constantly, and perhaps unconsciously, allowed other people's membership in this or that group to influence the way we think of them. This is, one would hope, a transitional phase on the way to another unconscious—albeit much fairer—way of thinking.

Culture-war combatants suggest that the only alternative to choosing up sides in their conflict is retreat from the cultural battlefield to a safe, vague middle ground of unprincipled compromise. Not at all. To refuse to choose can mean, quite simply, that one refuses to be dictated to by ideology, that one insists on retaining one's right to think, to judge, to examine each new issue or question or artwork on its own merits. It can mean that one insists on retaining one's right to exercise independence of mind instead of mindlessly taking up arms in a phony war between extremists who have no real desire to learn from each other—and who, truth be told, have very little interest in anything that could properly be called culture.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JOSEPH EPSTEIN

Elizabeth Bishop: Never a Bridesmaid

> If a poet praises another poet's verses, you may wager that these are slight and worthless.
> —La Bruyère

In the history of modern literary reputation, the career of Elizabeth Bishop makes an extraordinary chapter. Miss Bishop was, in her lifetime, one of the most relentlessly praised and handsomely rewarded of poets. The Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the Book Critics Circle Award, the special publishing arrangement with *The New Yorker*, the Consultantship in Poetry at the Library of Congress, the international prizes, the various grants and fellowships, the teaching job at Harvard, the honorary degrees—like late autumn leaves on a gently breezy day, all these and more floated down onto Elizabeth Bishop's lap. What made all this so remarkable is that some of these rewards came so early and on the basis of so little actual poetic achievement. "Always the bridesmaid, never the bride," she commented one year when it was rumored but it turned out she didn't win the National Book Award. Not to worry, though, for she won it soon thereafter. In her case, "Always the bride" might have been closer to it.

Elizabeth Bishop was born in 1911, which puts her at the senior end of the generation of poets—Lowell, Jarrell, and Berryman chief among them—who, for their combined résumé, might have availed themselves of Wordsworth's couplet: "We poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness." *Poètes maudits* though they sometimes thought themselves and indeed may have been—they did lots of boozing, wore out their hearts too early from bad living, suffered insanity and often ended in suicide—theirs was also a generation ignited by calculation and on fire with ambition. When you read their correspondence and the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

biographies and memoirs about them, you can scarcely miss how careful they were, all of them in their own ways, most meticulous caretakers of their careers. It was only about that larger entity, their lives, that they were heedless.

But, then, a modern poet unmindful of his career is rarer than a pinto flamingo. In the twentieth century, where to be even a greatly gifted poet guarantees nothing, attention to matters of career must be paid. When in 1953 Elizabeth Bishop learned of the death of Dylan Thomas, she wrote to a friend: "Dylan made most of our contemporaries seem small and disgustingly self-seeking and cautious and hypocritical and cold." One thinks here of that antithesis to the oh-screw-it, let-'er-rip spirit of Dylan Thomas, the still young T. S. Eliot, writing in April 1919 to J. H. Woods, his former philosophy professor at Harvard:

> There are only two ways in which a writer can become important—to write a great deal, and have his writings appear everywhere, or to write very little. It is a question of temperament. I write very little, and I should not become more powerful by increasing my output. My reputation in London is built upon one small volume of verse, and is kept up by printing two or three more poems in a year. The only thing that matters is that these should be perfect in their kind, so that each should be an event.

Elizabeth Bishop was not quite so careful a caretaker of her career as Jarrell or Lowell or Delmore Schwartz—all of whom seemed to calibrate the effect on their reputation of each book review, reading, anthology appearance, blurb—but she, too, knew that to these things attention must be paid. The three testimonials for her successful application for the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship for poetry, the first of many such awards she would win, came from Marianne Moore, Edmund Wilson, and John Dewey—the first two names are impressive, but that last name, it seems to me, is the real kicker. Living in Brazil between the ages of forty-one and fifty-six, she may have seemed, as we nowadays say, out of the loop. But she wasn't, not really, for she never lost important touch with Randall Jarrell and Robert Lowell, both of whom did much to advance her cause. When it came to looking after her own career, there was nothing loopy about Miss Bishop.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Elizabeth Bishop was famous for the paucity of her production. This at first flush might seem as if she were on the T. S. Eliot success plan: ". . . printing two or three more poems in a year . . . these should be perfect in their kind. . . ." In fact, she was, for the better part of her life, something very close to a blocked writer, and one may be sure her perfectionism was no help here. One could extract from her letters[1] an impressive threnody of self-incrimination about her inability to get her work done. Two or three poems a year, à la Eliot, would to her have seemed positively Balzacian production. Innumerable were the delays she caused in publication of her books because she wasn't able to complete enough poems to comprise a volume of sufficient thickness. Of her first book, *North & South*, she wrote to Marianne Moore: "The book seems so thin and says so very little, actually." Beyond innumerable were the self-lacerating comments she made about her own inability to finish a poem. When she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1956, she wrote to her New York physician and friend Anny Baumann: "I'm sure it's never been given for such a miserable quantity of work before." The Bishop *oeuvre*, though one hesitates to use so grand a word for so slender a body of work, small as it is—a slender volume of prose, a *Complete Poems* filled out by adolescent verse and translations, a book-length translation from the Portuguese—nonetheless feels a bit padded.

Although there was no shortage of despondency and madness in Elizabeth Bishop's life, the early portion given over to gladness was itself all too brief. By the age of five she was, for all practical purposes, an orphan. Her father died, of the kidney complication called Bright's Disease, when his only daughter was eight months old. The shock was one from which her mother, then thirty-two, never recovered; and when Elizabeth was five, Gertrude Bishop, after bouts of hallucinatory and even violent mental illness, entered a public sanatorium in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, from which she never emerged—she died in 1934, just before her daughter was graduated from Vassar College—and in which her daughter never saw her. To lose a father to an arbitrary illness before one's first birthday

[1] ONE ART: Letters, by *Elizabeth Bishop*. Selected and ed. by *Robert Giroux*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $35.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and to lose a mother to madness at five—that, surely, is enough to keep a lifelong therapeutic conversation going.

Such psychologically cataclysmic events set strict and disabling conditions on the remainder of Elizabeth Bishop's life. After her mother's departure into madness, the young girl lived at various times with her two sets of grandparents as well as with aunts and uncles in Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts, and in Nova Scotia. She was always treated kindly, but in the nature of the case felt dislocated and separated from normal family life. As a child, she suffered eczema and asthma; the latter remained a problem lifelong. Religious belief was not available to her, and for sustenance of the spirit she early retreated into the aesthetic. As a young girl, she did watercolors and won school essay prizes, but it was poetry that early lit her fire: she read Whitman at thirteen, George Herbert at fourteen, and Gerard Manley Hopkins at sixteen.

Plump, not especially pretty, she must have seemed an odd girl: shy yet in the realm of culture authoritative. At Vassar, she was called by her ecclesiastical surname, Bishop, in recognition of this authoritativeness. The writer Eleanor Clark, a classmate, said that Elizabeth Bishop could be "quite authoritative in class without saying a word"—so much so that she could make young teachers nervous. She entered Vassar in 1930, the year after the beginning of the Depression and the year, too, after the class of Mary McCarthy, the school's most notorious graduate. Her fees were paid by her Bishop grandparents, and, at the age of twenty-one, she came into a small inheritance from her father's estate. Although she never had a lot of money, Miss Bishop, apart from two short-term jobs—doing correspondence at a bogus writing school in New York, working a mere five days cleaning binoculars in Key West during World War II—never held a regular job until she was in her fifties, when she began teaching, first at the University of Washington, later at Harvard, and briefly at M.I.T. and N.Y.U.

At Vassar, she wanted to major in music, later regretted not having majored in classics, and did in fact major in English. She was among the inner circle of literary young women who were stirred by the poetry of Eliot, Auden, Stevens, and Hopkins. In the classroom, she acquired admiration for the poems of George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, and other seventeenth-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

century English poets. One of her teachers described her as "egocentric—aloof—responds to beauty in any form." Another said that she was "doomed to be a poet." She contributed poems, stories, and essays to campus publications, including one, *Con Spirito*, she helped found. She began sending poems to little magazines, with occasional successes, and won an honorable mention when she submitted poems to the young Lincoln Kirstein in a contest he held for young writers at his magazine *Hound & Horn*. At Vassar, she was notable for taking serious things seriously, and about nothing was she more serious than about poetry.

Elizabeth Bishop had friends at Vassar, but these friendships, one assumes, must have been considerably qualified by three secrets she had had to keep to herself. The first was that her mother was in an insane asylum. As an orphan, the young Elizabeth had more freedom than most Vassar girls, and spent most of her summers not with family but with classmates. Some classmates knew that her mother was still alive but not under what conditions; certainly, she never featured this particular item of permanent sadness life had placed on her menu.

The second was that she had what is euphemistically called a drinking problem. One definition of a drunk is someone who, in his thirties and forties, drinks as much as he drank in college. How much Elizabeth Bishop drank at Vassar is not known, though Brett C. Millier, her biographer,[2] writes that "Elizabeth drank destructively from that time onward, and her life by 1939 was dominated by her need for alcohol and by the effects of heavy drinking on her body, mind, and relationships." She had the bad luck to come into her maturity when Prohibition was still intact and alcohol had the added thrill of being illegal; and, possibly, the even worse luck to have inherited alcoholism, for her Uncle Arthur and other members of her family were notable boozers. She fought alcohol all her life, and frequently lost. No sedate tippler, when she drank, she was a three-sheets-to-the-wind, fall-down-the-stairs, break-your-collarbone, blue-eyed, hide-the-hair-tonic drunk.

Elizabeth Bishop's third secret was that she was homosexual,

[2] ELIZABETH BISHOP: Life and the Memory of It, by *Brett C. Millier*. University of California Press. $28.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

though it is not altogether clear the extent to which she was herself then in on the secret. She had the occasional date when at Vassar, among them with the then young poet Donald Stanford. Later, she went out with a literary-minded man four years older than she named Robert Seaver. He worked in a bank, had literary interests, and, owing to polio, walked on crutches. She turned him down when he proposed marriage to her, and not long afterward he committed suicide. Two days after his suicide she received a note from him that read "Go to hell!" In *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop*,[3] Frank Bidart, who was later to be among her confidants, claims that Miss Bishop told him, Bidart, she was then in love with a Vassar roommate named Margaret Miller, a painter who lost an arm in a car accident when travelling with Elizabeth Bishop and another friend in France.

Even less is known about the origins of female than is known about male homosexuality. Is it caused genetically, by environment, by the brutishness of men, by conscious preference? Brett Millier, in considering Elizabeth Bishop's lesbianism, remarks that in her, as in most people of her historical time, "the pressure to conform was great, and the dream of a 'normal' life died hard." Later in her life, her fame already secured, Miss Bishop was still not ready publicly to own up to her homosexuality, even though everyone seemed to know about it. When Frank Bidart wrote candidly about his own homosexuality, Elizabeth Bishop worried that it might be used against him professionally, and she told him that she herself "believed in closets, closets, and more closets."

Lesbian relationships, of which Miss Bishop had a number, must have been most comfortable for her. She was someone who couldn't bear to be alone; she couldn't take too much in the way of pressure; complicated sexual involvement was not her idea of a jolly time. In any relationship she entered into, it had to be understood that she was the vulnerable one, the one who needed to be looked after. She once remarked that she wished she had had a child, but, with all her problems, it could only have been a disaster. (Robert Lowell later avowed he regretted

[3] REMEMBERING ELIZABETH BISHOP: An Oral Biography, by *Gary Fountain* and *Peter Brazeau*. Afterword by *Bonnie Costello*. University of Massachusetts Press. $35.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

never asking her to marry him. What a marriage made in hell that would have been!) She herself needed a mother, and this seems to have been the part that many of her lovers, even ones much younger than she, played in her life. Lota de Macedo Soares, the Brazilian aristocrat who made a home for her during the happiest period in her life, seems to have functioned as both her mother and father. All her days, Elizabeth Bishop, this seemingly calmest of calm poets, was a woman terribly in need.

An insane mother, an incipient drinking problem, worry about her own sexual proclivities—this was rather heavy baggage for a young woman to carry around. How Elizabeth Bishop would hate having this baggage opened by the customs officials of literary criticism (in this essay, I am, alas, acting as one). She is on record as deploring the "confessional" in poetry. She had a falling-out, though not a rupture in relations, with Robert Lowell for his late poetry, which was full of personal revelations, a subject on which Lowell thought her the victim of "extreme paranoia." She didn't like poets washing their linen in public; and having others wash hers for her would doubtless have galled her all the more. "I just hate the level we seem to live and think and feel on at present," she wrote to Lowell on this matter in 1972. "Stick around, baby," Lowell, had he a gift for prophecy, might have replied, "you ain't seen nothing yet."

Other people—editors, friends, former pupils—have been doing the confessing for Elizabeth Bishop. For the most part, it has been done gently, without malice. In Brett C. Millier, Miss Bishop has found a sympathetic biographer; in Robert Giroux, with whom she dealt first at Harcourt, Brace and then at Farrar, Straus & Giroux and who has brought out the edition of her letters, an understanding editor; and in Gary Fountain, who finished the job Peter Brazeau had begun in *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop*, a careful chronicler. (Things could have been much worse: the letters she wrote to Lota de Macedo Soares, in which she must have had to fend off suspicions about her drinking and jealousies about other lovers, were burned by Miss Soares' friends and family.) But the cumulative effect of all this biographical material has been to reveal a poet who lived the better part of her life psychologically *in extremis*, with sad squalor and ample anxiety her regular companions. This isn't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the picture that this most refined and coolly distant of poets herself wished to present to the world.

Yet without these revelations it is far from clear that Elizabeth Bishop's poetry would have been as accessible as it now seems. She herself wrote almost no criticism after her student days. Her letters only occasionally touch on literary matters, though when they do, these often seem splendid, little morning sunrises of pure insight. When Robert Lowell sent her, in typescript, many of the poems that would later appear in *Life Studies*, for example, she replied by recalling those wonderful moments when artistic creation lights up the entire world:

> If only one could see everything that way all the time! It seems to me *it's* the whole purpose of art, to the artist (not to the audience)—that rare feeling of control, illumination—life *is* all right, for the time being. Anyway, when I read such an extended display of imagination as this, I feel it *for* you.

Yet, now that the revelations have been made, the milk spilt, the linen aired, the gossip all gushed, one suddenly realizes that many of Elizabeth Bishop's poems are made simultaneously more penetrable and a little less impressive with the addition of biographical information. Not least of the ironies here, of course, is that this woman, who was always careful to separate her life from literature—"You felt with Elizabeth," Clement Greenberg said, "life came first"—who fancied herself the most private of poets, produced poetry of a kind that was finally inseparable from her own life. To the critic Jerome Mazzaro she wrote:

> Well, it takes an infinite number of things coming together, forgotten, or almost forgotten, books, last night's dream, experiences past and present—to make a poem. The settings, or descriptions, of my poems are almost invariably just plain facts—or as close to the facts as I can write them. But, as I said, it is fascinating that my poem ["Crusoe in England"] should arouse in you all those literary references.

That was written in 1978. Now, only seventeen years later, after the publication of Elizabeth Bishop's letters, a biography, and a book of reminiscences by friends and acquaintances, after reams and reams of critical attention, we know a great deal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more about what went into the making of those poems. The price to be paid, the terrible trade-off that has been made, is that poems cannot be read in isolation any longer. Once one might have said that these refined, rather pure poems, difficult though they may be to crack for ultimate meanings, have their own splendor. Once one might have said—as Howard Moss did say—that "Miss Bishop is completely sane" and "she has made sanity interesting without lecturing us about it." No longer. Now one more readily picks up interior meanings in her poems and understands that behind these often cool and well-made verbal contraptions, villanelles, sestinas, and the rest, the poems of Elizabeth Bishop, lie the themes of dispossession, loss, withdrawal, remorse, isolation, consolation sought but never found—more sadness, really, than any one human being should have been asked to bear—and that they represent the ruins shored up from a hard and often horrifying life.

On one reading, one might say that, given all that Elizabeth Bishop had gone through, the achievement that is her poems is all the more impressive. On another reading, knowing all that she went through, one can just as easily read into these poems all the evasions, scamping of difficult truths, and thinness that biographical knowledge, that snake in the literary Garden of Eden, makes all too plain.

Elizabeth Bishop has been treated very kindly by criticism. "The reviews [of *Geography III*] so far have been embarrassingly good," she wrote to Anny Baumann, "but of course someone is bound to *attack*, sooner or later." That was in 1977. Twenty-one years earlier, having been told that there was a stringent review by Edward Honig of the combined volumes *North & South* and *A Cold Spring* in *Partisan Review*, she writes to her friend Pearl Kazin: "I've never minded criticism a bit, strange to say—but what if this review (I haven't seen it yet) says the TRUTH?—does point out all the awful faults I know are there all right?"

The first line in Honig's review pointed up the influence on Elizabeth Bishop's poems of Marianne Moore: "Elizabeth Bishop's poetry aspires to a very high order of craft and sensibility—to a perch, say, which only Marianne Moore, among living women poets, precariously occupies." Miss Moore was twenty-four years older than Elizabeth Bishop, when the two women met in 1934, the same year Miss Bishop's mother died. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

meeting was brought about by the librarian at Vassar College, where Miss Bishop was still a student. They met outside the reading room of the New York Public Library, a possible get-away strategy for Miss Moore if this Vassar student, like so many she had met before, turned out to be a clucking bore. In fact, the two women clicked straightaway. David Kalstone, who in *Becoming a Poet* has written at length about the relationship of the two women, remarks that Elizabeth Bishop "enjoyed playing her role of forward niece" to Marianne Moore. Miss Moore, for her part, must have taken pleasure in so attractive and talented an acolyte.

Marianne Moore became not only Elizabeth Bishop's teacher but also, in effect, her editor and agent. Along with heavily editing the younger woman's poems and prose, she sent off her work to magazine editors she knew; on occasion, when Miss Bishop had already sent the same poem off to another editor, this caused a contretemps. Miss Moore became Elizabeth Bishop's sponsor, at one point introducing her work in *Trial Balances*, a volume of poets under twenty-five, each introduced by an older, established poet. No influence without anxiety, as Professor Bloom never tires of telling us, and Elizabeth Bishop found she had at times to struggle free of Miss Moore's attempts at total management, choosing to ignore her editing or publishing work she knew Miss Moore would disdain.

Marianne Moore struck a nice balance with Elizabeth Bishop of helpfulness, praise, and criticism. She told Elizabeth Bishop that she had "a precise and proportioning ear" of a kind rare in contemporary verse. Of some of the young Miss Bishop's poems, she said that they "are so fine, and dart-proof in every way—especially 'The Weed' and 'Paris, 7 A.M.'—that they shame my impulsive offer of helpfulness." But she could also say that Bishop was "menaced by the goodness of your mechanics," adding that, "When I set out to find faults with you, there are so many excellences in your mechanics that I seem to be commending you instead and I wish to say, above all, that I am sure good treatment is a handicap unless along with it, significant values come out with an essential baldness." What I take Marianne Moore to be saying here is that, in the end, content, the true meaning of a poem, must come through strongly and that Elizabeth Bishop, so sound in so many ways, had not yet in her poems achieved this.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What Miss Bishop gained from the relationship with Marianne Moore, apart from endorsement and the delight of being in the fairly regular company of a genuinely eccentric woman with an authentic commitment to art as a way of life, was a method of poetic creation. Twenty years after they met, Elizabeth Bishop wrote to Marianne Moore to tell her that her poetry "opened my eyes to the possibility of subject-matter I could use and might never have thought of using if it hadn't been for you.—(I might not have written any poems at all, I suppose.)" She also learned from Miss Moore the art of accuracy of observation. She learned a useful realism, too, a realism for aesthetes of the kind that Miss Moore applauded in Wallace Stevens, who showed that "realism need not restrict itself to grossness." It made a firm impression on Elizabeth Bishop that when two young men took Marianne Moore to see Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, Miss Moore responded by saying, "Life is not like that."

David Kalstone writes that Miss Bishop "adopted Moore's methods but learned to use them in different ways." That method was to make pure description do the work of narrative. Description, in this wise, becomes not so much a method as a principle of composition. Henceforth her poems would be attempts to capture recognitions that came about through meticulous observation and description of landscapes, animals, objects, places, stop-action moments of travel—almost never of persons or of dramatic situations. When she came to review Elizabeth Bishopa's first book of poems, Marianne Moore gave it the title "A Modest Expert." More than twenty years later, Howard Moss picked up this notion when, in a review of Miss Bishop's *Questions of Travel*, he wrote that "these poems are profoundly modest." Others have referred to her "modest masterpieces."

Another thing Elizabeth Bishop learned from Marianne Moore, or so Miss Bishop tells us in "Efforts of Affection," her portrait of Miss Moore, was "not to worry about what other people thought, never to try to publish anything until I thought I'd done my best with it, no matter how many years it took—or never to publish it at all." This, sensible lesson though it may seem, was, as advice goes, a mixed blessing.

Costiveness of publication was for Elizabeth Bishop an endless problem. A red thread—rope is perhaps more like it—that runs through her letters has to do with the endless regret about

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her inability to produce more work, which brought on depression, which often erupted into a bout of alcoholism, which ended in humiliation and shame, which increased her deep insecurity, which led to her ever greater dependence on the women who took it upon themselves to look out for her. She produced four slender volumes of verse at roughly ten-year intervals: *North & South* (1946), *Poems* (1955), *Questions of Travel* (1965), and *Geography III* (1976). She did her translation of *The Diary of "Helena Morley"*; she turned out a quite small body of journalism and eight chiefly autobiographical sketches that are assembled under the rubric "Stories" in *The Collected Prose*. For a woman who had no serious job until her middle fifties, nor any of the domestic cares of being either wife or mother, who garnered all the available grants and fellowships (*Partisan Review*, Guggenheim, Rockefeller, Ingram-Merrill, and so on), this was disappointing, not least to Elizabeth Bishop herself.

The one place where her writing seemed to flow was in her letters. *One Art*—the title comes from her poem about the art of accepting loss in her own life—shows this flow at floodtide. Miss Bishop's letters, like her poems, tend to be chiefly descriptive; she arranged much of her adult life so that she lived in exotic backgrounds—Key West, Florida, Petropolis, forty or so miles from Rio de Janeiro, where her friend Lota had built a home, with an outbuilding that was a separate studio for Elizabeth—from which she could report on the flora and fauna (much of it human fauna) surrounding her. Cool-eyed, she described human beings, in Florida and in Brazil, as if they were herons or some rare sort of mango.

Elizabeth Bishop's letters are chatty and tactful, yet, despite the pleasant fumes of intimacy they give off, except for those to Dr. Anny Baumann and to Robert Lowell, they don't give too much away. We learn of all the books she planned but never got around to writing—Balzac called plans for such unwritten books smoking "enchanted cigarettes"—among them, a book of travel essays on South America, a collection of short stories, a play ("of all things"), another book of pieces about Brazil. Tidbits of backflesh—my own menu prose for minor backbiting—from time to time creep in: a letter to Lowell puts down a Jarrell poem recently published in *Partisan Review* (Jarrell later writes to Lowell saying he doesn't think much of Bishop's long

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

poem "At the Fishhouses"), a put-down of Marianne Moore's translation of La Fontaine, unkind words for William Carlos Williams, Richard Eberhart, and Robert Frost—and for Richard Wilbur's poetry.

But the note of sadness rings insistently. After drinking up all the booze in a friend's apartment in Washington, she writes to say that "I get along better on boredom and adversity than on gaiety and, relatively speaking, success." Many are the reports of falls off wagons, of little breakdowns, of asthma and allergy attacks, of every kind of anxiety (about doing poetry readings, lecturing, meeting certain people), of suicidal thoughts: "I don't want to be this kind of person at all," she writes to her friend the painter Loren McIver, "but I'm afraid I'm really disintegrating, just like Hart Crane, only without his gifts to make it all plausible."

Reading along in these letters, one soon comes to feel that the end cannot be far off—except that one feels in one's hand the heft of another 440-odd pages to go—for poor Miss Bishop, when she is rescued by Lota de Macedo Soares. In the winter of 1951, she set out for a trip to South America, and when staying with Lota, a trilingual Brazilian whom she had met in 1942 in New York, she developed a violent allergic reaction to the fruit of a cashew tree. Lota nursed her during her illness and invited her to stay on in Brazil as long as she liked. Miss Bishop was swept away by the sweetness and generosity of the offer and stayed on for no fewer than fifteen years.

These years, with only brief interludes of sadness, were the happiest years of Elizabeth Bishop's life. A year after settling into Brazil, she writes to Robert Lowell that "I am extremely happy, for the first time in my life." She is given—"my lifelong dream"—a toucan, whom she names Sammy. She learns to drive and acquires, from the proceeds of the sale of her story "In the Village" to *The New Yorker*, an MG, something to write about to Randall Jarrell, another car enthusiast. She has a vegetable garden, orchids grow outside the studio Lota has built for her—"things couldn't be better." She discovers cortisone, which inhibits her asthma, makes her euphoric, and, for once, literarily productive: along with her translation, during these years she turns out a dozen poems, the stories about her childhood, and a book on Brazil much rewritten by the editors at Time, Inc. who commissioned it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Yet, sad to report, as the old maxim has it, Anywhere you go, there you are. Which is to say that even in Brazil, where the clouds came into the house, where the landscape was permanently lush, and the living was easy, old problems arose. Elizabeth Bishop suffered setbacks on the booze front. The thinness of Brazilian culture and the maddening lackadaisicalness of South American ways—"no one *ever* learns *anything*, and a 'habit' is unheard of"—began to get to her: the flora turns out to be much more impressive than the fauna, which, even for a writer whose subject is nature, can after a while be tiresome.

But saddest of all, her relationship with Lota, the love of her life, began to go sour. Lota, a woman of extraordinary energy, became caught up in Brazilian politics while put in charge of creating a grand people's park in Rio de Janeiro. Lota was apparently a high-energy melancholic, and when things began to go bad with her park project, she sank into depression and then breakdown. When Elizabeth Bishop decided to aerate the relationship a bit by taking the recently dead Theodore Roethke's teaching job at the University of Washington, things did not get better but rapidly worse.

"Lota has been simple hell to live with for the past five years," Miss Bishop writes to Dr. Baumann, adding in another letter that "well, we were happy for ten years or so," and then again: "it has been the worst stretch of my life except maybe the first eight years." Later, in the autumn of 1967, when Miss Bishop went to New York, Lota, not yet recovered from a breakdown, joined her and their first night together overdosed herself with Valium, lapsed into a coma, and died a week later.

Poor Elizabeth Bishop, ejected from the only paradise she had ever known. Although she would live another twelve years and would go on to even greater poetic fame, the remainder of her life after Lota has finis written all over it. She lived in San Francisco: attempted to live in Ouro Prêto, the highest point in Brazil, where she had acquired and attempted to rehabilitate an eighteenth-century house; lived for a while in Cambridge, then settled into an apartment at Lewis Wharf in Boston. As always, there were women who were ready to live with her, travel with her, clean up after her. She would climb on and slip off the wagon, and had now reached the stage in her drinking at which broken bones seemed to be part of the regular protocol.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Elizabeth Bishop was never for long without money worries, and these increased as she headed toward old age. The only solution, a most imperfect one, was teaching. Robert Lowell, who had sponsored her for so many grants and prizes, arranged for her to take up his post teaching the writing of poetry at Harvard. She detested the snobbery and one-upmanship of Harvard, and felt herself, as every honorable teacher must, something of a fraud in taking money for teaching students to write: "These things shouldn't be *taught*—I'll be relieved and have a moral load off my mind when I sell my house [in Ouro Prêto] and my papers and don't have to do this any more." Out of the need for money, she gave up her compunction about giving poetry readings. The time of honorary degrees had arrived. When elected to the then fifty-member American Academy of Arts and Letters, she accepts but cannot help remarking to an old college friend that there are so many "*creeps*" among the members.

Here is the winning Elizabeth Bishop—the figure who must be set next to the tragic Elizabeth Bishop if anything like a complete portrait is to emerge. Dana Gioia, who was her pupil at Harvard, has remarked upon the admirable way "in which the best parts of the bohemian and the bourgeois naturally co-existed in her character without affectation." This is the woman who, after being interviewed for the *Vassar Quarterly*, discovers that an interview with the very political Muriel Rukeyser appears in the same issue, making her, Miss Bishop, "sound like Billie Burke." (Her own politics, of the standard-issue Nixon-hating kind, were never central to her character.) This is the woman who can describe the novels of Robert Penn Warren as "just like *Gone with the Wind* with metaphysical footnotes." This is the woman who refers to a Brazilian friend "wearing a blue shirt and purple trousers, looking like a large bunch of violets." This is the woman who is amused by being referred to, in Brazil, as "the famous American poetess," and remarks that she likes the word "poetess," which "I think is a nice mixture of poet and mistress."

A leitmotif in Elizabeth Bishop's letters is her distaste for being segregated as a woman poet. "Perhaps I shouldn't say this—but it antedates Female Lib-ism by 40 years" she wrote to Robert Lowell, "I'd rather be called *'the 16th poet'* with no reference

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to my sex, than one of 4 women—even if the other 3 are pretty good." She was distrustful of women writers—Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, Elizabeth Bowen—who always made one aware of their social origins, calling them the "'our beautiful old silver' school of female writing." She told May Swenson that she would never agree to appear in anthologies of women poets, because "literature is literature, no matter who produces it. . . . [and] I don't like things compartmentalized like that."

Miss Bishop came of age before the universities had so badly colonized and bollixed up literature into little ethnic and gender subgroups. She grew up admiring the last generation of poets who didn't earn their livelihood in universities: Stevens, Eliot, Marianne Moore, and Robert Frost—non-blue-jean-wearing, which is to say altogether adult, poets. She believed that writers were chiefly of two kinds: good and bad. She knew, in her heart she knew, how difficult it was to be really good. As for her own standing, she told Wesley Wehr, a painter and paleobotanist in Seattle: "Oh, it's not that I think I'm all that good a poet, but I look around at the other poems being written by my contemporaries, and I think, maybe I'm not so bad."

On the other hand, being Elizabeth Bishop, she much more frequently must have thought, "maybe I'm not so good, either." Not much could quell the self-doubt that ran so deeply in her. The same year, 1956, that she won the Pulitzer Prize she also won a *Partisan Review* fellowship underwritten by the Ford Foundation. "Never has so little work dragged in so many prizes, I'm afraid," she wrote to her friend Pearl Kazin, "and I catechize myself minutely, worrying about *why*."

As for the quality of her work, Bishop was even less than confident about it. When Isabella Gardner compliments her on "Visits to S. Elizabeths," her poem about Ezra Pound, she replies that she herself "really couldn't tell much myself whether it conveyed my rather mixed emotions or not." After praising Robert Lowell for some of his *Life Studies* poems, she remarked: "Oh heavens, when does one begin to write the *real* poems? I certainly feel as if I never had." Earlier she had written to Lowell: "On reading over what I've got on hand I find I'm really a minor female Wordsworth—at least I don't know anyone who seems to be such a nature lover."

What was the quality of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry? In *Remem-*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bering Elizabeth Bishop, Joseph Frank says that "she seemed to be one of the few poets about whom there was very little disagreement." In her lifetime, she had first Marianne Moore behind her, then Randall Jarrell and Robert Lowell and James Merrill. After her death, fellow poets praised her even for what one might have thought weaknesses. Thus, Frank Bidart, on the matter of the paucity of her production, remarks that "one of the great things about her work is that she *didn't* write too much. . . ." Marianne Moore, in her 1946 review of *North & South*, proclaimed that Elizabeth Bishop is "spectacular in being unspectacular." After this she was fixed forever into being Our Lady of the Understated Emotions. "The quiet exactitude of her work," said Dana Gioia, "showed that emotions didn't have to be screamed to be genuine." Howard Moss, who was her editor at *The New Yorker*, in one of three different full-court praising pieces he wrote about her, writes that "she has taught us without a shred of pedagogy to be wary of the hustling of emotions, of the false allurements of the grand." How tired Elizabeth Bishop must have been reading yet again about her bloody restraint and freaking modesty! As she wrote to James Merrill, "I don't get much criticism. . . ."

Since her death, of course, Elizabeth Bishop has received a vast quantity of criticism, almost all of it approving. Always a poet's poet, she has, in death, become a critic's poet as well. Yet the quality of this criticism is on the whole disappointing. Even in the hands of such intelligent critics as Helen Vendler and the late David Kalstone, there is very little in the way of strong formulation of what, exactly, Elizabeth Bishop's poems are really about and why they are important. Apropos of her writing in Brazil, for example, Kalstone wrote: "Did the disparate poems and stories she was writing cohere, in their own way, as self-presentation? Did her work in these years amount to something as sustained as Lowell's recent work appeared to be?" That is a good question that Kalstone, in *Becoming a Poet*, a book unfinished at the time of his death, never quite got around to answering. Nor, insofar as I am aware, has anyone else.

The general critical procedure in dealing with Elizabeth Bishop's poetry is to assume that she is, in her understated, modest way, a genius—"genius tries to pass itself off as less than it is," wrote Howard Moss—and go on from there to attempt to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tease out the meaning of her individual poems. "These poems," Moss wrote, "strike me as ageless; there are no false starts, no fake endings." Moss does acknowledge that "these poems, so easy to read, give up their secrets slowly."

I should myself put this last proposition rather differently: Elizabeth Bishop usually achieves an impressive line-by-line lucidity without this lucidity necessarily yielding a final, or higher clarity. Although Miss Bishop went to the precisionist school of Marianne Moore, her description is far from infallible. Is the cold sea, as she writes in "At the Fishhouses," really "like what we imagine knowledge to be: / dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free"? Knowledge, as Miss Moore might say, is not like this. In "Cape Breton" we are presented with "little white churches [that] have been dropped into the matted hills / like lost quartz arrowheads." This, too, doesn't quite ring the gong, at least not for me. Neither does the thunder, in "Electrical Storm," "Personal and spiteful as a neighbor's child"; nor, from "The Riverman," does the moon "burning bright / as the gasoline mantle with the flame turned up too high, / just before it begins to scorch." Whenever Miss Bishop avails herself of personification—as in the lighthouse in "Seascape" who thinks "he" knows what heaven and hell are—it is almost always disappointing.

A large number of Miss Bishop's poems, well-made and mechanically sound though they may be, do not, as she writes in her letter about Robert Fitzgerald's poems, "ignite." She wrote a number of splendid poems: "The Fish," "Filling Station," "First Death in Nova Scotia," "Crusoe in England," and "One Art" would be among my Bishop selections were I the anthologist charged with filling an ample volume. But the case for her being a major poet, the modest genius of American poetry, seems to me not easily made.

Elizabeth Bishop's very method—that of careful description, the "perfectly useless concentration" that she saw as at the heart of poetic creation, out of which a deeper truth would presumably flow—too often failed to work the magic it sometimes can. She was committed to steering clear of the personal in her poetry, which, with only occasional exceptions, she did, the most notably successful exception being the poem "One Art." The art in the title of that poem is the art of loss, which, she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

came to understand, was the theme pervading her own life. To have dwelt on it, to have written endlessly about her personal losses, would only have demeaned her. With all its nightmares, her life was a full-time struggle, from which her writing gave some relief but no real solution.

Richard Wilbur, in *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop*, recounts, apropos of his going off to church one morning in Maine, Elizabeth Bishop saying to him, "You don't really believe all that stuff. You're just like me. Neither of us has any philosophy. It's all description, no philosophy." Wilbur goes on to say that at this point "Elizabeth shifted to talking about herself and lamenting the fact that she didn't have a philosophic adhesive to pull together an individual poem and a group of poems together, but she was really quite aggressive at that point." Neither did she have any interest in moral complication. "For Bishop," Helen Vendler has written, "the charm and interest of life was that it was as it is; she believed in no religion, no afterlife, no external sanctions or morality."

Precise description has its own morality; some might argue, its own theology: God, it has been said, is in the details. But without a larger vision than Elizabeth Bishop was able to acquire, major literature may not be possible. Certainly, it prevented her from ever producing those large philosophical poems—"The Wreck of the Deutschland," "Sunday Morning," "The Wasteland," "Two Tramps in Mud Time"—that are at the center of every major poetical corpus in our century. Critics have tried to inflate the importance of such poems of Miss Bishop's as "The Moose" or "Filling Station" (with its ending line, "Somebody loves us all"), turning them into theologico-philosophical statements. They are lovely poems—good, nice, really quite swell poems—but they just cannot carry the weight of critical significance assigned to them.

Forced to play a bad hand through life, Elizabeth Bishop played it as well as she could. At her best, she seems a winning woman: amusing, brave, without either exhibitionism or complaint. Her small but genuine achievement marks her as too good a poet to fail to understand that, despite the claims made on her behalf, she was a long way from great.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JOHN HAINES

The Ancestors

And from the marshland across the water
came suddenly a cry, repeated,
as a great flock of birds,
or of creatures that looked like birds,

rose from the cypress, clapping
unfeathered wings, their sawbills
shearing bark and leaves . . .

Wheeling, gathering height and numbers,
they turned toward us, crying
with voices like no birds
we ever knew, piercing and shrill.

And in one interval of that monstrous
crying we felt another sound,
as of ponderous feet treading
the marsh, and thickets crashing.

Then saw above those distant trees
huge heads and sinewy necks
upthrust, as though that forest
were waking, root, branch and crown.

The light darkened overhead,
the nightwind rose . . .

And now with those towering beasts
and the ever-gathering flock,
the marsh and the waters were moving.

1978-93

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rodin: The Gates of Hell

In all the rotting tombwork, paint
and clutter of empire,
ruin of faith and death of God,
there was no cathedral but himself,
no more than a drafty shed,
a clay mask shattered by frost.

Posterity would be a flagged pavilion
where each of his maligned
commissions, whether man or woman,
prophet or fallen saint,
survived a solitude, no more
than an inch of Paradise.

Apprentice to the black, industrial
iron, to the lime and dust
spilled from the swine-face of God:
the demon-smile erased, fled
once more to the shadows,
and the sorcerer's fire quenched.

As in his thronged and towering *Gates*,
never to be completed,
but green as the bronze woodland
from which in shamed confusion
centaur and satyr were driven,
exiled even from Hell.

Each face in its anguish and stupor,
each stunned gesture,
arrested leap, and every stifled
outcry—sealed in the clay,
the metal and stone,
that each inhabits alone.

1984-93

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Clouds at 30,000 Feet

Clouds are the thoughts of
Heaven.
—Kenneth Rexroth

I

Voiceless and masterless,
the sheep of this pasture.

Their fleeces heavy with rain,
they wander, neither lost
nor found, grazing on air.

Now one or two among them lift
their heads, as if they'd winded
in this silent heaven
that other, greener hill.

II

Here too there is night,
starlight and burning sunrise;
the icefield among the peaks
where they stand or lie,
snow upon the greater snow.

But nothing so familiar
as the hoof-starred clay
and bitten grass.

Better than this grey
vacancy in which they drift,
mastered by the wind,
better to break ranks and fall,
to find on that thorny earth

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

beneath them
salvation in the mire.

Obedient to a power aloft,
the cloud-sheep break
and gather . . . Mute congregations,
flocks of the driven faithful.

1965-79

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NINA BOGIN

Seven Hawks

The seven black hawks circling above our house at twilight
must be the seven lost brothers
of that girl who's walking across the landscape

carrying her father's ring bunched up in a handkerchief,
a wooden stool, a loaf of bread,
and a beaker of water in case she gets thirsty.

But it's so hard to keep an eye on her
as she stumbles across fallow fields and overgrown forests
with her hands full of household objects

that even her brothers have lost sight of her.
They beat their wings and call out
their hoarse signal-cry, "kri-i, kri-i."

Perhaps they're saying "sister, sister"
in their dark syllables. Or perhaps like real hawks
this is their favorite hunting hour

when the rabbits and rodents
come out to browse
in the rustling grass

and bits of violet cloud
break away and drift
over different sides of the mountain.

We can see they're conferring as they circle
in a black ring that floats
on the glide-strokes of their wings.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They balance there, right above us.
We crane our necks to watch them, and the sky
sucks us into a place so high

we forget who we are and what century
and what country
and what village we belong to,

and what our names are,
and what this longing is
that seems to swallow all other longings.

Then the oldest brother
breaks the circle and heads east
with the others in his wake.

If they've spotted her, or
a distant tree-branch or the twitching of a shadow
has given them a lead, we'll never know.

All we can tell is they're flying out of our valley,
and in seconds I can see seven black dots spinning
over the Baerenkopf into the forests

of Alsace and Germany. I stand in my garden
holding my green watering-can
and wonder if by now their sister

has reached the end of the world
and entered the cavern
where the hawk brothers sleep

and if she'll have time to drink
a sip of wine from each of the seven beakers
and slip her father's ring into the last.

And in which country
has she left her cumbersome stool,
and where has she waylaid her own beaker?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And why, when the seven hawks
cleave through the evening sky
and disappear, does the air

seem to fill and throb with the light
of their leave-taking, as if it was us
they were leaving behind?

The Orchards of Vandoncourt

Here are the orchards in winter
on the Vandoncourt plateau.

Did I dream them, or have I simply been waiting
to find them? Haven't they already

written themselves into my poems?
Haven't their rows of bared trees

already planted their symmetry inside me?
They make me want to weep.

And they make me jubilant.
I want to take their green distance

as if I could stretch out my arms
and gather the sky and the fields

into a bundle I'd carry off somewhere
for safekeeping—

some secret space bigger than the space
of my mind, more vast, more open.

I want to breathe this high orchard air
wherever I go, for as long as I walk

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on hard ground. Forty years.
It's a good age

to look across the plateau
and see the Vosges to the north, blue

and grey, clouds as wide as they are
pressing down into their valleys, the first snow

of the year in drifts on their slopes.
Forty years. I've learned a few things,

patience, mostly, and how to watch
the changing light.

I want to be as young as my daughters
and as beautiful. I want my hair

to be black again, I want to be my husband's bride.
I want what everyone wants

and no one has, for time to be as sharp and still
as it was today when I walked down the tractor path

into the hollow between the stubbled hillsides,
mud oozing under my boots,

my black coat flapping like the strong wings
of the bird I could be, as if I could soar,

take flight over Vandoncourt
and its pale-green orchards,

keep on walking with the stride
that's brought me this far.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Let's Share the Frugal Meal

Let's share the frugal meal of friendship.
Lay the chipped plates

on the table, uncork
the dusty bottle. Cut slabs of bread

from the loaf, slice the yellow cheese,
the onions. This nourishment

is real, and so are our words, our laughter.
And the chimney fire is real, and winter

rattling the shutters. Let's drink
to this moment, that bears

so many names. We'll call it
complicity, instead of

hunger. We'll give it
our trust.

Friends, let's lift our glasses
to the burnished night,

to now, to us, to happiness,
those chimeras that wink

like heady wine!
The betrayals

will come later,
when the humble feast's over.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There's No Hour

There's no hour of the day or night I'm afraid of.
Is it because I still think I'm immortal?
I love morning's milky light, and the blue
silk rustling of evening.
And the night air as I water the dahlias,
when the damp seeps down from the mountains.

In certain hours, my father keeps me company.
His warmth comes to visit me from deep inside myself.
I can feel his love as if he were standing,
his hands in his pockets, watching me.
His smile rests on the summer air,
into the slow night darkness.

Sometimes I think about the hours
of his last morning,
hours so immense with solitude
I keep leaning into them
as against a tree
being uprooted over and over again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stockholm, Summer 1990

for Madeleine Hatz

Blue islands,
raise up a city of merchants and kings!

String bridges from quay to quay,
erect a palace, hermetic as a jewel-box.

The whole city is feasting on light, merely
on water and light . . .

The sky spreads across your history
with indifference, unloading its cargoes of clouds,

its enormous, useless cotton bales.
And in late afternoon, as on any other day,

the night packet to Helsinki,
huge as a factory, and as unwieldy,

moves gravely out of the harbor.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAIRI MacINNES

The Ghostwriter

I came to hate the telephone.
I'd leave and make tea and, unmissed, return

while she banged on about love
and her beauty when young—I'd never believe

how she ached when she saw it going!
And there were the husbands and her other men

to be dealt with, and her stage career,
her talent instantly hailed, notices to swoon for,

the command performance in great palaces, etcetera—
Istanbul at her feet, the Middle East, America.

She had our title ready: *Baghdad to Beloit.*
"And so," I interrupted, "is that it?"
and heard her sigh "So..o..o.. Darling, can we meet?"

At her elbow I had sensed the dustiest provinces,
the seediness of Anatolia, the indifference

of Midwestern downtowns; old fat Emma Bovary
looking for dues the world would pay

"when our book hits the bestseller list."
Who said I'd collaborate? I began to protest,

but saw she was braver than she'd admit
and something rang sweetly in her self-delight.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I told her sternly she should understand
to write the book I must have a free hand:

the woman must be silent and the image speak.
That image, unlike her, would hold back;

it would be amused, ironic, sensitive,
to tell of a secret self and an inner life

such as her story called for, to give it worth.
"What *inner life*?" she cried, remembering her youth,
when the sole value was herself.

In the end she went along, suspicious,
repeating now and then we both were ladies,

as if only a lady would respect her soul,
not lift her life as raw material.

I pointed out the voice was hers,
charged with her marvellous marvellous

charm. Look too, I said, what else I'd given her:
insight, logic, clarity, a biting humor.

At first she felt total joy. And then unease—
obscurely put out, unfocused, travestied.

In six months she exploded: "This is your book, not mine.
You've made it up. And lots of it is wrong—

not people, or events, or history—
they're fair enough—but me—the heroine isn't me.

I recognise *you*—quite colorless—plain dull:
my life's been rich and gorgeous and beautiful—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I've paid you plenty. What d'you mean, I can edit?
Get it into your little head, it won't fit
me, your sad book. My God, it's quite pathetic."

I returned manuscripts, tapes, transcriptions.
She struggled alone with her own soft fictions

for half a year, couldn't find anyone else
to work for her, and so gave up. Unfinished,

unappreciated, woman and image eyed
each other with distaste over the ink divide.

A pity: she was so elegant, that image! She
would never have owed me money, or thrown my work away.

And nothing left me but wooden spoons, a pair
the woman gave me, carved from one block. I think of her

when I use them in the kitchen every day,
a craftsman's spoons from Konya, in her own country,

with twelve coats of varnish, smooth as porcelain,
the wood clear beneath in color and grain,
yet harder than wood ever was, as hard as bone.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CARL PFLUGER

Progress, Irony and Human Sacrifice

I

Plutarch, in his *Life of Themistocles*, tells us that just as the battle of Salamis was about to begin,

> . . . Themistocles was offering sacrifice alongside the admiral's trireme. Here three remarkably handsome prisoners were brought before him . . . At the very moment that Euphrantides the prophet saw them, a great bright flame shot up from the victims awaiting sacrifice at the altar and a sneeze was heard on the right, which is a good omen. At this, Euphrantides clasped Themistocles by the right hand and commanded him to dedicate the young men by cutting off their forelocks and then to offer up a prayer and sacrifice them all to Dionysus, the Eater of Flesh, for if this were done, it would bring deliverance and victory to the Greeks. Themistocles was appalled at this terrible and monstrous command from the prophet, as it seemed to him. But the people, as so often happens at moments of crisis, were ready to find salvation in the miraculous rather than in a rational course of action. And so they called upon the name of the god with one voice, dragged the prisoners to the altar, and compelled the sacrifice to be carried out as the prophet had demanded.
>
> (c. 13; trans. by Ian Scott-Kilvert, Penguin Classics)

There is no doubt that Plutarch, writing more than 500 years after the event, recounted this episode of human sacrifice with horror, revulsion, and more than a little shame. He is eager to exonerate his hero and cast all the blame on an aberrational outbreak of vulgar irrationalism, a mass psychosis brought on by the stresses of war. And well he might. He regarded the Persian Wars (as most of us have been in the habit of regarding them ever since) as the great struggle of Greek against barbarian, the fight for freedom, humanity, civilization and enlightenment: for everything that makes our tradition worth defending. Yet here we have Greeks, at the very threshold of what was to be their Golden Age, behaving more barbarously than the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

barbarians themselves, succumbing to panic in their moment of trial, and perpetrating an act which seems to belong (if such things may be said to "belong" anywhere) to a much more remote, more primitive, antiquity. Like Plutarch, we might all prefer to believe that such things had never happened, or at least that they were done only very long ago, by people with no connection to ourselves. But this bit of history shows only too plainly that human sacrifice, at least as an occasional emergency measure, persisted far longer than it is comfortable for us to admit.

Nor was this the last time in Greek history that human sacrifice was at least considered (to speak in the idiom of modern strategic planners) "a live option." More than a century later a similar event was narrowly averted by the sort of dodge which must be counted, in these matters, as one of the stratagems of progress. This too was, probably significantly, at a time of military emergency, and Plutarch again tells the tale: in his *Life of Pelopidas*, a Theban general who, on the eve of the battle of Leuctra (371 B.C.) had a dream in which he was commanded to sacrifice "a red-haired virgin" in order to ensure victory. When Pelopidas reported the dream to his colleagues, a typically Greek debate ensued, with generals sounding incongruously like sophists, philosophers and antiquarians, as they argued the pros and cons of carrying out the bloody command to the letter. (Precedent was generally in favor of it, philosophy against.) At last the prophet Theocritus threw his weight on the side of humanitarian opinion by declaring that a red-maned filly (which had opportunely intruded herself into the proceedings) would be an acceptable offering.

Plutarch's relief at this *equus ex machina* outcome is palpable; and in his summary of the arguments brought against human sacrifice he clearly presents his own view:

> . . . that such a barbarous and impious sacrifice could not be pleasing to the powers above, because it is not the Typhons or Giants or other monsters who rule in heaven, but the father of gods and men. They argued that it is probably foolish in any case to believe that there are deities who delight in bloodshed and in the slaughter of men, but that if they exist, we should disregard them and treat them as powerless, since it is only weak and depraved

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

minds that could harbour such cruel and unnatural desires.
(c. 21; trans. by Ian Scott-Kilvert, Penguin Classics)

Such sentiments, of course, are entirely to Plutarch's credit; but we may want to ask ourselves, did they not make the question almost too easy for him? For Plutarch, in whom Hellenism had evolved into a religion comparable to Hinduism in its abhorrence of bloodshed (see his essay *On*—really "against"—*Eating Meat*) there was no question at all that the gods were good by definition; good in a way that made it impossible for him to believe that human sacrifice could ever be desirable to them. Therefore it could bring a man no favor; therefore, in Plutarch's universe, it could not even be a temptation. But for men of an earlier period, the case was different. Presumably at a sufficiently ancient period (which for Plutarch would have been represented by the myths of the Heroic Age, and which we know, or think we know, through the findings of archeology) things were equally unproblematic, but on the other side of the moral divide: when Agamemnon, like the Biblical hero Jephthah, slit his daughter's throat to purchase his military victory, he no doubt felt that the price of divine favor was a bit on the high side that day; but his duty would have seemed clear to him, and the thought that no god had the right to demand such a sacrifice would never have entered his bronze-clad head.

But for most of the thousand years or so between Agamemnon and Plutarch things seem to have been much less settled, and proportionately more agonizing. Somehow, and increasingly throughout the course of that millennium, people were coming to feel that human sacrifice was fundamentally wrong; but they had as yet no good reason to believe that it was in any way unwelcome to the gods. On the contrary: all their traditions told them that human flesh was the meat which the gods prized above all else. Therefore they could have no confidence that such offerings were, pragmatically speaking, ineffective—or even (such being the dread inspired by the gods in those days) safe to leave undone. This was of course the formative era of all subsequent civilization, that Classical or Axial period which gave birth to all the religious and philosophical traditions which have continued living into our own day. But the feeling of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

revulsion against human sacrifice had begun long before the appearance of any fully-articulated philosophy. It was a movement in the history of religion, but we can scarcely see in its origins any kind of self-consciously critical theology. No doubt this general sentiment in favor of humanity contributed something to the eventual rise of just such a philosophical theology as we find expressed most luminously in Plutarch's own convictions; and once attained, this philosophically reformed religion decisively reinforced the original impulse. But the men whose lives Plutarch was writing had not enjoyed, in their own days, any such sense of metaphysical security.

To put it most starkly: the men of those times had begun to find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being, in some significant respects, superior to their own gods; but they did not know exactly what to do about it. Ultimately they would succeed in disciplining those gods to the new moral order, but it was a long and harrowing process: a millennial dialogue, fraught with terror and tension, but also enlivened by the most high-spirited exercise of ingenuity, irony, courage and human-hearted aspirations. Plutarch's stories of Themistocles and Pelopidas give us a couple of glimpses into that turbulent and unsettled world; perhaps we should look for a few more such glimpses before we presume, tentatively and with profound respect, to pass judgment on the achievements of that epoch.

II

To the Greeks of the Classical period, and later to the Romans, the traditions of human sacrifice in earlier times remained a disquieting memory: "*Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*," [1] as Lucretius said (I, 101) of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia; but they did remember them more or less clearly. When the tenderer consciences of a later time produced more palatable variants of the myths (as, in Euripides, Iphigenia was not really sacrificed, but snatched away at the last minute and replaced on the altar by a deer) the older versions were not expunged from the record, but continued to exist, and to be

[1] "How much evil has religion been able to induce."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cited, as chilling reminders of a harsher past. The Hebrews, on the other hand, who passed through a similar development at about the same time, were far more consistent in editing their national memories. As a result, positive references to human sacrifice in the Bible are far fewer and more obscure than they are in the surviving corpus of Greek literature. They can, however, occasionally be discerned: sometimes where a brief reference has escaped the notice of the priestly or Deuteronomic redactor; sometimes where the matter of the tale was deemed important enough to be retained despite its embarrassing revelations about the mores of the early Hebrews. And perhaps these Scriptural instances are the more worth our attention insofar as our culture remains one in which the Biblical tradition is central, the *pièce de résistance* of our spiritual banquet, to which Hellenism (and latterly, various exotic spices from the East) have been added as garnishes, more or less strongly applied according to individual tastes.

The Bible's clearest and most notorious analogue to Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia (in its later, bowdlerized version) and, for that matter, to the one expediently averted by Pelopidas, is of course Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, commuted at the last minute to that of the ram providentially caught in the thicket (Genesis 22:1-14). By analogy one may infer an earlier version in which Abraham's first-born was indeed sacrificed, as is demanded by Yahweh in Exodus 13:2. But the ssiduity of the Jerusalemite editors has forced this conjecture to depend for support on circumstantial evidence. (Abraham, as the first and most revered ancestor of a whole people, would be expected to have his record most thoroughly cleaned up and revised in accord with subsequent values.) But elsewhere in the Bible, where the vigilance of a later age was, for whatever reason, less strict, we may find evidence for the persistence of human sacrifice among worshipers of Yahweh into a period much later than the Heroic, or Patriarchal, ages. Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter (Judges 11:31-40) is a clear, but somewhat isolated, example; more revealing and significant, perhaps, is the sacrifice forced on Saul by Samuel—though the Biblical text stops just short of calling it that.

Saul, the first king of Israel, has a good claim to being the most unjustly maligned historical figure in the Bible. Both of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the sources which, according to modern scholarship, constituted the bulk of the two Books of Samuel were biased against him. The Early Source favors David and his dynasty; the Late Source is hostile to the very idea of a secular monarchy, being written from that priestly and theocratic perspective which gave its final shape to all the Biblical literature. It is this later source which informs us that Saul, after winning a war against the neighboring tribe of Amalek, affronted Yahweh by refusing to make a holocaust of the whole nation, even going so far in his self-indulgent depravity as to spare the life of the defeated king, bringing him home with the spoils as a prisoner. In a bitter confrontation at the Yahwist sanctuary of Gilgal, the prophet Samuel denounced Saul, declaring that his government had lost its divine sanction, and browbeat him into surrendering Agag, the captive king; and then, as the Authorized Version renders it in its inimitably stately manner, "Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the LORD in Gilgal" (1 Samuel 15:33).

So Saul, according to this Late Source of Samuel (commonly dated to around 750-650 B.C.) lost the kingship of Israel because he had withheld the human sacrifice which Yahweh, the god of Israel, expected as his due after a war. (The laws mandating this sort of holocaust—usually rendered in English as "placing under the ban," or "devotion unto utter destruction"—have been preserved for our edification in several parts of the Torah: Exodus 17, Numbers 31, Deuteronomy 13 & 20.) In this refusal Samuel sees only greed; but perhaps we should pause for a modest encomium on King Saul, who dared to refuse this service to a bloodthirsty god (self-interested though his motives may have been—as whose are not?) at a time when he had not attained to Plutarch's serene conviction that such refusal was both safe, and morally correct. If we have any grounds at all for believing that the history of religion includes some evidence of moral progress, Saul deserves a share of the credit for it. Enslaving a people defeated in war may not be the last word in enlightened, progressive behavior, but it does constitute a modest step above the practice of exterminating them.

And perhaps even Saul's deferral to Samuel should be seen as not wholly a surrender, but as the conclusion of a negotiated

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

compromise. The prophet, after all, did not get the holocaust, the "utter destruction" that he demanded in Yahweh's name, supported though he was by the sanction of law and custom: he got only the "representative" sacrifice of a single (albeit royal) individual. Such negotiations were indeed typical throughout the millennial process by which, among all the ancient civilizations, the gods were gradually weaned from their taste for human blood. A readily identifiable category of myths, which may be denoted "myths of commutation," preserves some memory of this process. Sometimes (as in the stories of Isaac and Iphigenia) it is presented as a gratuitous act of benevolence on the part of the gods themselves; more often, and more significantly, we may witness a process of bargaining between man and god, a tense and fearful dialogue in which a new set of religious arrangements was painfully (and for a long time precariously) worked out. In a charming passage of his *Life of Numa Pompilius*, the semi-mythical lawgiver-king of Rome, our old friend Plutarch relates how an angry Jupiter told Numa that he might gain protection against thunder and lightning with an offering of "heads":

> "With onion heads?" asked Numa. "Heads of men," replied Jupiter. Trying again to soften the cruelty of this dictum, Numa said, "With hairs?" And as Jupiter answered, "With living—" Numa interrupted with "Sprats!" . . . Jupiter returned to heaven amused . . .
> (c. 15; trans. by L. R. Loomis, Classics Club Editions)

—and that was why the Romans of Plutarch's day had an innocuous little charm against the thunder, and why they no longer performed human sacrifices—unless one counts the prisoners of war garrotted at the culmination of a triumph, or the gladiatorial "games" of the arena: but that belongs to another part of our story.

This legend of Numa's quick-witted bargaining with Jove, bald and almost farcical though it is, may remind us of some other scenes of negotiation with a deity bent on bloodshed. In Genesis 18: 22-33, when Abraham tries to intercede on behalf of Sodom, the manner of his pleading ("For fifty righteous men?—Forty-five?—Forty . . . ?") suggests nothing so much as an obsequious bazaar merchant dickering with a particularly difficult customer. On that occasion, as we all remember,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Abraham failed, and Sodom felt the full force of Yahweh's genocidal wrath; but Moses had more success when the people of Israel themselves were threatened (not for the last time) with that same wrath:

> "Then the Egyptians will hear of it," [he warns Yahweh] "and they will tell the inhabitants of this land . . . Now if thou dost kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard thy fame will say, 'Because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land which he swore to give to them, therefore he has slain them in the wilderness.'"
>
> (Numbers 14:13-16, Revised Standard Version)

Right. If you kill us, what will the neighbors say?

These last two Biblical stories may not be about the cultic practices of human sacrifice *per se* (as we saw in Samuel, the Bible is extremely chary of calling such things by their right names) but they do clearly reflect an ethos, and a conception of God, in which human sacrifice was only too possible. This is still a god whom one must approach with fear, the same god who can say (2 Kings 21:13) ". . . I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down." Not really a civilized god, not yet quite housebroken. At the same time, all these stories also show us something else as well: they show men struggling to grasp something better, and negotiating to make it acceptable to their gods—gods in whose power they still believed, and in whose goodness they wanted to believe, but of whose acceptance of the newer, more humane and merciful order they could not yet be at all sure. This accounts for the somewhat frantic character of most of these myths, their undertone of desperation; it is also a tribute to the courage of the men of those times, who were in the process of conducting a protracted revolution, perhaps the greatest moral revolution ever effected by human beings: a development which has been insufficiently recognized and celebrated, I think, precisely because to reflect on it too closely is to experience too sharply the shame of being descended from forebears who once participated in such terrifying rites. These gruesome vignettes are the family skeletons in the closets of all our cultural, ethnic and religious traditions.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

III

It is likely enough that some of those skeletons will always be with us: such rites would never have arisen did they not express something essential about the human species, perhaps even about the deepest roots of life itself. As we bear in our blood the salinity of the Paleozoic seas, even while walking on dry land and breathing that free oxygen which we inherit from our remotest discernible ancestors (the anaerobic bacteria, without whose chemical self-immolation we could never have come into existence: who now survive furtively in the gangrenous wounds of our own bodies) and which we now transport, bottled, into the ultimate airless aridity of outer space; as we painstakingly dig up and mount in museums (those vestigially numinous closets of our nominally secular culture) the bones of our more spectacular reptilian relatives, gazing at them with a unique fascination equally familiar to the child, the student and the most seasoned professional; so must we carry with us, even to this day, some remnant of those primordial intuitions which found such graphic enactment on the bloody altars of antiquity: that blood will have blood, that prosperity must be paid for, that all who live and thrive must live and thrive by the death of something else; and that those thus sacrificed become somehow hallowed: a part of us, but a part filled with dread, which will continue to haunt us for a long time thereafter. Literally to sacrifice any being is to make it holy (*sacer* + *facio*); but the holy always includes an element of the terrible, the horrible, even the repulsive, that from which we recoil, even as we long for it and look to it for an enhancement of our own existence. The Latin word *sacer* illustrates this ambivalence quite starkly. It is, of course, the source of our word "sacred," and most of the time that is *approximately* what it means. But often enough, in the Classical writers, its sense is clearly more sinister. "*Auri sacra fames*," for instance (*Aeneid*, III, 57), has been one of the favorite quotations in Latin school anthologies ever since Vergil penned it in the first century B.C. Generally it is translated as something like "accursed craving for gold"; but a more literal reading would make it the "sacred hunger for gold." As far as we can make out, the primary meaning of *sacer*, for the Romans, was: recognized as belonging to the gods: therefore

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

likely to be of surpassing excellence, purity, etc.; but also therefore forbidden to us: hence *untouchable* (another word highly charged with ambiguity!), something to be avoided, feared, turned away from, etc. "Taboo," a word Captain Cook imported into English from Tonga, may be the closest equivalent current today; but for a comparable range of meanings, developed strictly within the King's Own English, one might also consider the changes which have been rung on such words as "dreadful," "awful," and "terrible"—at least since the time of that royal pedant King James I, whose own team of Biblical translators thought it not irony to address him as their "most dread Sovereign." Terror and sublimity accompany each other more often than not; and together they define a large part of the sensibility that makes us human.

It is the curse (and glory) of our species to be always aware of an obscurely ominous summons to some ever wider breadth of being and consciousness—and the idea of sacrifice certainly seems to express one facet at least of that longing for transcendence: especially if it is the sacrifice of ourselves; or at least (second-best, no doubt, by a long shot) of "one of our own."

Yet these dark and haunted intuitions are capable of being modulated through time; and the succession of such modes, incessantly calling out to each other, challenging each other with all the ironic confrontation of which human beings are capable, is as clear a demonstration of progress as any we are likely to discover in the long course of human history. I recognize the ironies which encumber that word "progress," but I will insist on it nevertheless; even though I can not (and probably would not, even if I could) provide a summary definition of its "ultimate" goal; even though, like Pindar, I

> . . . know not what the day will bring, what course
> after nightfall
> destiny has written that we must run to the end.
> (*Nemea 6*; trans. by Richmond Lattimore,
> U. of Chicago Press)

I say only that reviewing this sanguinary fragment of our religious evolution can give us some modest, but genuine, grounds for hope: about the human condition, perhaps; or at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

least about some prospects for the continually unfolding story of life at large.

As a recognized institution, performed shamelessly under its own name, human sacrifice has existed in many forms, from the very beginning of what we are pleased to call civilized life. Royal tombs of the earliest dynasties in Egypt, Sumeria and China were "staffed" with the slaves, bodyguards and personal attendants of their deceased masters, slain to accompany them into the other world. Sometimes the kings themselves were sacrificed, likely enough as incarnations of the god whose recurring death and rebirth was seen as renewing the cyclical order of the world, on earth as in heaven. Children were slain at the inauguration of new buildings or cities, and their bodies buried beneath the walls; the murder of Remus by Romulus at the beginning of Rome may be a disguised memory of just such a "foundation sacrifice," a custom for which Biblical documentation may be found in 1 Kings 16:34. Aside from these regular and public solemnities, private individuals as well as rulers might offer up a victim on any number of special occasions: fulfilling a rash vow, responding to an ominous portent, contending with extraordinary distress, or merely seeking some particular favor. And of course war has always produced the greatest opportunities for collecting this sort of god-fodder.

The purely royal and domestic rites seem to have been mollified, and then decisively abandoned at an early time, commuted to bloodless and artificial substitutes. The statuary placed in Egyptian tombs from the Third Dynasty on is a vestige of the hecatombs of human victims sent down with the kings of the Archaic period, as is the army of life-sized clay soldiers found in the tomb of the "First Emperor" of China's Ch'in Dynasty. And kings soon learned how to avoid sacrificing themselves, either by staging purely symbolic rituals of death and rebirth (as in the Egyptian festival of Heb-Sed) or by procuring surrogate "kings for a day" to shed their blood for them, as tended to happen in Mesopotamia. And while it is possible that the pillars carved into the likenesses of human forms (caryatides, atlantes, telamones) which are so prominent a feature of ancient architecture may have originated as substitutes for the real human beings formerly sacrificed as super-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

natural supports for the walls, it is tolerably certain that by the time our ancestral cultures were taking their classical forms, neither Greeks nor Hebrews were in the habit of cementing foundations with human blood and bone.

No, it is only under conditions of special stress that human sacrifice survived into the Classical period, and especially in the stresses associated with war. It is hardly likely to be an accident that the stories which bear on our theme—Themistocles and Pelopidas, Jephthah and Iphigenia, Saul and Samuel—all occur in the context of war. War not only tends to inure us to the shedding of human blood: it also produces the situations in which it is most likely that desperate expedients will be attempted. War, in some sense not entirely metaphorical, may be said to be the principal form in which human sacrifice has survived into the present day. It may be significant that in the sophistical debate attending the dream of Pelopidas, the conservative advocates of the old-time religion cited in support of their case, not only Themistocles and such obvious instances from the mythical ages as Iphigenia, but also the example of Leonidas, the King of Sparta whose defense to the death of the pass of Thermopylae could be seen, they said, as a religiously sacrificial act. A Roman parallel to this may be the story of Decius Mus, who voluntarily threw himself onto the Samnite spears in an act which the Romans recognized as a *devotio*, a solemn offering to the gods on behalf of the community. Comparable acts of heroic self-sacrifice by Roman commanders crop up in the pages of Livy with suspicious regularity; more soberly revealing of Roman attitudes was their treatment of prisoners of war. At the climax of a triumphal procession the highest-ranking prisoners taken from the defeated enemy were executed, out of sight in a dungeon, just before the official, open-air, sacrifice (of an ox) was performed. One could scarcely ask for more eloquent evidence, both of the primitively sacrificial nature of this custom, and of the shame which the Romans, by classical times, had begun to feel about it. And of course we should here recall the most notorious Roman exercises of gratuitous mass slaughter, those "games" put on in their arenas. These seem to have grown out of Etruscan funeral games, and as such they may point back ultimately to the royal sepulchral immurements of the ancient Near East; but what

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kept them in existence throughout most of Roman history was the steady stream of prisoners sent down to them from the wars. Meanwhile—and again under the stress of acute military *emergency—the Romans could still, on occasion, revert to* human sacrifice in its purest and most unambiguous form. Livy recounts (XXII, 57) how shortly after the crushing defeat inflicted by Hannibal at Cannae (216 B.C.) two pairs of human victims were buried alive at Rome; and he darkly confesses that such things had occasionally been done before, though he calls it, with obvious embarrassment, "a most un-Roman rite."

No doubt he would have preferred to believe that it could only have been done by Rome's enemies; and indeed it does seem to be true that the Carthaginians, of all the major civilized peoples of the ancient world, persisted longest with all the archaic forms of human sacrifice, as did their motherland of Canaan/Phoenicia. But even among them some of the most dramatic examples seem to have occurred in military contexts, both before and after their wars with Rome. There was, for example, the case of their general Hamilcar, who fought against the Greeks in Sicily early in the fifth century B.C. According to Herodotus (VII, 167) when the battle of Himera was going against him Hamilcar threw himself onto the sacrificial pyre in a last desperate attempt to turn the tide. His side lost that war nonetheless, and in the peace treaty which followed the Greeks included a prohibition of further human sacrifices. Considering that this battle occurred in the same year (some said on the same day) as Salamis, we may be tempted to wonder: was this stipulation "merely" a matter of imposing humanitarian standards on a "barbarian" people, or was it also, at least in part, something like a "disarmament clause," an attempt to level the playing field of Ares by prohibiting a practice which the Greeks of that time regarded (rather as we regard chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons today) as shameful and reprehensible, but not necessarily ineffective? In other words, that what was most dreadful to them about human sacrifice was not that it wouldn't work, but that—given the commonly recognized character of the gods—it probably would?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

IV

From a narrowly religious point of view one might begin to suspect that the primary point of going to war was always to provide a clearly-defined class of sacrificial victims: human beings whom it is lawful, indeed mandatory, to kill. In this perspective a civilization like that of the Aztecs would represent the ideal type—at least according to the account of their practices which they offered to their Spanish conquerors (themselves no strangers to the disciplines of holy war, and to the ceremonial infliction of death as a religious duty). The more blood-curdling texts which may be found in the Old Testament have almost that same primitive simplicity, but already mixed with a more pragmatic, almost incipiently secular, motive: the covenantal bargaining of *do ut des*,[2] the notion that by promising one's god an offering of all the enemy, one may bribe him into fighting on one's side with sufficient zeal to ensure victory. This is the theory of sacrifice most generally discernible in the testimonies we have been gathering from both Scriptural and Classical sources; and it seems also to have been embraced with enthusiasm by those barbarians *par excellence*, the Celtic and Germanic tribes who lived beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire, as may be seen in many passages from Classical and Norse literature alike, as well as in the grim archeological evidence which has come to light from peat bogs all over northern and western Europe. "Odin has you all!" cried King Erik of Sweden as he hurled his dart over the enemy in A.D. 960, according to the *Flateyjarbok*; just what that meant may be seen from a brief notice in Tacitus of a skirmish in the first century between two German tribes, each of whom

> had devoted, in the event of victory, the enemy's army to Mars and Mercury, a vow which consigns horses, men, everything indeed on the vanquished side to destruction.
>
> (Annals, 13:57; trans. by Church & Brodribb, Modern Library)

More graphic is this description by Paulus Orosius of the behavior of the Cimbri after a victory in 105 B.C.:

[2] "I give, so that you may give."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> In accordance with a strange and unusual vow, they set about destroying everything which they had taken. Clothing was cut to pieces and cast away, gold and silver were thrown into the river, the breastplates of the men were hacked to pieces, the trappings of the horses were broken up, the horses themselves drowned in whirlpools, and men with nooses round their necks were hanged from trees. Thus there was no booty for the victors and no mercy for the vanquished.
>
> (*Historiae adversum Paganos*, V, 16)

Orosius, a Christian writing in the fifth century, seems not to have noticed that this is precisely what Samuel had demanded of Saul, and what is prescribed as the normative rule of war in Numbers and Deuteronomy; otherwise he would hardly have called it "a strange and unusual vow." It is possible that such similarities had not escaped Bishop Ulfilas, the "apostle to the Goths" less than a century earlier: at any rate, when he translated the Bible into Gothic he chose to omit the books of Samuel and Kings, as being too likely to incite his already bloodthirsty people to behavior for which they needed no further encouragement. But then Ulfilas had lived for much of his life among Goths as well as Romans; and this may have given him a perspective inaccessible to Orosius, who had grown up entirely under the protection, and within the intellectual limits, of the later, Christianized, Roman Empire.

That he did in fact regard such rites as "strange and unusual"—and so repugnant to the moral sense of himself and his readers as to require no argument—shows that with Orosius we have at last arrived safely within the moral universe familiar to Plutarch, and to ourselves. But Plutarch, still painfully conscious of the horrors lurking in the not-so-distant past of his own tradition, had a sharper appreciation of his own era's religious enlightenment. At least he had a keener sense that in the history of human dealings with the mysterious forces of the world, and with the darker impulses of the human soul, something like progress does occasionally happen. (A strong sense of such progress also informs his diatribe against eating meat, which he concedes as a dire necessity to primitive hunters, but denounces as an "unnatural" vice in civilized people who enjoy the "luxuries" of an agriculturally supported society. Plutarch's reasoning about "nature" and "necessity" is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hardly the last word on such things; but he was thinking about them, at least with half-opened eyes.) Orosius, in contrast, was no longer aware of the distance that he (or rather, his ancestors) had travelled. The dark shore from which they had set out was hidden from him by the fog of retroactive interpretation, tendentious commentary, and the general editing of collective memory so characteristic of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Orosius had forgotten the shame of his own predecessors, and with it the true sense of their more than heroic accomplishments.

V

This brings us to the great irony of progress. First we achieve, often at great cost, some new and superior level of development; then, out of shame, we repress the memory of our origins, depriving ourselves of all credit for having overcome our earlier limitations. Like upwardly-mobile immigrants who become ashamed of their own parents, the whole human race, in its tenure of this planet, has tried much too often, and much too successfully, to forget the sordid and painful past from which we grew. This is why so many people, and not only Fundamentalists of all faiths, are so uncomfortable with all forms of evolutionary thought; this is why the idea of progress has always been, and will always remain, controversial: a subject of never-ending ambiguities, arguments and contradictions.

Certainly the idea, or even the hope, of progress has not fared spectacularly well in our century. Not only has it been battered by all the flagrant horrors which the world's most self-consciously advanced societies began visiting upon each other in 1914, but—perhaps even more seriously—it has been poisoned and degraded by its polemical use as a rhetorical stick with which to beat ideological opponents. No human being of any sensibility can ignore the fact that "progressive" has been taken up as a proprietary label by some of the most monstrous and appalling political formations of our, or any other, time.

So the more naive and uncritical beliefs about progress which were fashionable during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been quite thoroughly discredited. Such facile as-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sumptions as that progress is somehow inevitable, and may be left to take care of itself, like biological evolution; that it is always and unambiguously good and cost-free; or that it is a uniform process, fulfilling some immanent law of human development as a simple function of time—all these may be abandoned without regret. But none of this makes progress any the less real, nor any less valuable. Rather, we should value it more highly, the more we recognize how uncertain it is, how rare and precarious; how dependent on the sustained and deliberate efforts of human minds, human wills, human spirit and human feeling. Such efforts have often been painful, and often spurred by the still more painful consequences of our own previous folly. For instance, we of the West tend to take pride in our having achieved a higher level of enlightened toleration than is found in the Islamic world, with which we are currently having so much trouble. But for most of our common history, the Muslims were much more tolerant than we; and if we surpass them in this virtue now, it is largely because, having first inflicted so much misery on ourselves in the religious wars of post-Reformation Europe, we finally felt the need for a stronger strain of tolerance to protect us from the virulence of our own fanaticism. Gradually we have learned to esteem as a principle what we first accepted, in a peace of exhaustion, as a distasteful political expedient; but we would still do well to recall how we came to our own Enlightenment.

Such sectarian feuds may also remind us that some of the severest denunciations of progress (as indeed of all aspects of evolution in life) have come from those who were, according to their own sense of things, arguing in defense of religion. And this presents us with another irony because, second only to the irrefutable advancement of science and technology, the clearest evidence of human progress may in fact be found in the history of religion, of which the gradual abolition of human sacrifice is the best and most dramatic example, showing us, among other things, that religions themselves are subjects of evolution. This is not the rectilinear progress of Condorcet, nor the "iron laws" of the Marxists—though their Hegelian notion of dialectic, if one takes care not to abuse it too thoughtlessly, conveys something of its ironically conflict-driven course. Rather, this record of the progressive humanization of the gods reveals an

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

enterprise much more supple and multiform, willful and ambitious: a process not without reason, to be sure, but rooted first of all in some "reasons of the heart"; that is, in a pre-philosophical human feeling for which arguments were found only long afterward. Those arguments, and the beliefs which they eventually established, were the fruit of a long and convoluted dialogue between men and gods, a sometimes tricky process of mutual self-imaging; a dialogue inflected differently in each of the national traditions involved, but always tending, in however roundabout a manner, eventually to elevate the character of the initially uncivilized gods with which men had to work. This is the dialogue which caused Nikolai Berdyayev to say that the Hebrew Scriptures contained the truest history ever written; but of course that history was not confined to any one tradition, and one need not share Berdyayev's Christian faith to recognize that the whole exercise was hardly less valuable even if one side of this negotiation was, from beginning to end, wholly the imaginary creation of the other.

VI

The very word "dialogue" is more likely to remind us of the Greeks than of the Hebrews. But the Biblical word "covenant" conveys much of the same substance, though with a different emphasis and in a different style. Covenant and dialogue both presuppose the existence of at least two distinct parties, with different personalities and different interests: both represent ways of "talking back" to the gods. Moreover, any covenant, even with a god, must include some element of negotiation. This is also implicit in the very notion of sacrifice: for if the gods, however much they may be more powerful than we, nonetheless want something from us, then we have something to bargain with, rather as even the most cruelly exploited workers have, in proportion as an economic order depends on their labors, a weapon available to them in their ability to go on strike. Of course we all know how in practice the freedom to use that weapon varies greatly from one time or place to another; and so it is hardly surprising that these divine-human negotiations also exhibited great variation.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Much of this was "merely" a variation in national styles, which grew naturally out of divergent historical experiences. Hebrew dealings with Yahweh are usually couched in the forms appropriate to the court of an ancient Near Eastern monarchy. "Let not the Lord be angry with me, who am but dust and ashes"—that is how Abraham pleads for the righteous Sodomites, having already prostrated himself on the ground: just the sort of manners which the Greeks found so offensive when Alexander the Great borrowed them from the Persian court. But the Jews, especially after the fall of the Northern Kingdom, lived for a long time under the threat of genocide, and could hardly feel free to afford that lighthearted irony and insouciant playfulness which characterizes so many of the Greek myths. Concentrated as they were into little more than a single city-state, it was only too clear to them that one false move could easily lead to their national annihilation, whether at the hands of hostile neighbors, or of their own irascible, ineffable, unfathomable Yahweh, who might at any time choose to wipe off the plate and slay the whole people "as one man." As with Dr. Johnson's man condemned to hanging on the morrow, this condition no doubt promoted a certain concentration of the national mind, but it was hardly conducive to the most relaxed and genial style of divine-human conversation. So the Biblical covenant was always being negotiated in an atmosphere of oppressive seriousness, and the ethical monotheism which the Jews, to their everlasting credit, nevertheless did manage to hammer out was always somewhat cramped in its style, always tinged with a sense of dread and terror (presumably these reflect ineradicable vices deep in the character of Yahweh himself) which has continued to oppress Judaism and its derivative religions ever since. That the Greeks had, by and large, an easier time of it was due to the pluralism both of their political existence and (hardly unrelated to it) of their mythology.

On earth of course the Greeks, more numerous and more dispersed, never faced that threat of national extinction; and in heaven too they enjoyed advantages denied to the Jews. Whenever Zeus got into one of his homicidal rages (which he did on occasion, if not quite so readily as did Yahweh) the Greeks never had to face that terrifying wrath alone and unmediated.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They could always call on the aid of other gods—Prometheus, for example—more philanthropic and peaceable by nature, ready to take their part as man's allies and protectors. Much more "wiggle-room" in heaven that way; more chance to play one god against another and to negotiate a more favorable covenant.

The Hebrew word for making a covenant means literally "to cut," just as we still speak of "cutting a deal." One explanation of this refers to the act of cutting up an animal, as for sacrifice (see Genesis 15:7-20) or as Samuel "hewed Agag in pieces before the LORD." Thus we may say that Prometheus quite literally cut a covenant with Zeus on behalf of the whole human race when he instituted the form of animal sacrifice usual among the Greeks. He butchered an ox, according to the authoritative myth, and divided the meat into two portions: all the best cuts in one pile, hidden by the stomach; and the bones in the other, covered by a deceptively juicy-looking layer of fat. "All-knowing Zeus" chose the fat and bones, and though he was angered by the trick, they remained the Olympians' share ever after, while men ate most of the meat in the communal meals which were the essential part of an ancient Greek sacrifice.

This tale, verging though it does (like Numa's verbal fencing with Jupiter) on the farcical, is told by Hesiod (*Theogony*, 535-557) who is generally the most pious and god-fearing of Greek writers, sometimes approaching an almost Hebraic sensibility in his earnest and gloomy moralizing. Homer's treatment of the gods is notoriously more playful; and while the tragic poets were generally more serious, they were also much bolder in playing with variant versions of the myths and in directly challenging the gods, confronting them with human demands for justice: think of the moral stature Prometheus achieves with his defiant opposition to Zeus in *Prometheus Bound*. From such myths we may see that irony is not merely a perspective from which to view the history of progress, it is also an integral part of the process by which progress has been achieved, an agent, a stratagem, of progress itself.

An ironic posture with respect to the most sacred objects of human concern has been most especially characteristic of the Hellenic heritage, from Homer and Hesiod down to the present. On the Hebraic side of our tradition such irony has

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

usually been far less welcome, denounced as blasphemy or at best as unseemly, wanton frivolity. But then the Jewish religions (including of course Christianity and Islam) when viewed from any perspective other than their own, can seem unbearably narrow-minded in their restrictive monotheism, their obsessive pretensions to doctrinal purity. This exaltation of single-mindedness is what chiefly has handicapped their appreciation of irony at its highest levels, for irony always implies keeping more than one perspective in view at the same time, and sustaining the creative and life-giving tensions among them in a polyvalent exercise of dynamic balancing. Wishing to be as broad-minded as possible, one might be inclined to say that there is, after all, much of value to be found on all sides of our diverse traditions . . . but then such breadth of vision would have put one already on the side of the ironists, as opposed to the true believers in Yahweh and his offspring.

Yet there is ample scope for irony even in the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures. Think only of the eponymous patriarch Jacob/Israel, of whose adventures with his friends and relations (the divine no less than the human) one is tempted to say what Oscar Wilde said of Dickens, that one would need a heart of stone to get through it without laughing; yet whose nocturnal wrestling at Peniel (Genesis 32: 24-30) may be seen as the supreme mythic prototype of all these confrontations between men and gods. And it is only with irony that we can simultaneously experience the power of such traditions lurking in our past (and therefore somehow present in ourselves) and also feel our own power to confront them: wrestling with them like Jacob, pleading with them like Abraham, adroitly redirecting them like Numa, or brazenly tricking them like Prometheus. Only by continuing with some such exercises, in terms and forms appropriate to our own day, will we remain worthy of any of our heritages.

For there was an inevitable natural limit to at least this phase of religious progress. Once the status of God had been so elevated and refined that he had neither desire nor need for sacrifice in any form—when he was no longer an "interested" party, in the material sense—then obviously this particular form of negotiation could go no further. And so, in what may be the ultimate irony of progress, the process which had begun

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

by humanizing the gods concluded by lifting them out of range of all the human passions which formerly they had shared with us. The God of the philosophers has no taste for blood because he has no blood of his own: he is beyond all blackmail, bribery or retribution; but he is also beyond love. And yet Plutarch, who certainly regarded himself as a philosopher, radiates the warmest human feelings to be found in any writer of antiquity. What does that teach us? Perhaps this: that in defining one's self against a background of inherited belief—whether that background is a savage mythology or the most sophisticated of philosophical systems—a man is never better than when he rises above his own nominal principles.

It is a habit of our time to take religion in one of only two modes: either Fundamentalist, in which commandments, however harsh, intricate or exacting they may be, are in principle simple and unambiguous: authoritative in a way which brooks no appeal to a "higher law" because one's god is the arbitrary source of all law, the ultimate judge himself not subject to judgment; or else liberal, tolerant, critical and forbearing, but so "high minded" that one has virtually no sense of God as something other than human: such people tend blandly to believe that whatever they think of as good must be true, *ex hypothesi*, of God. Either way, one's conscience is untroubled; either way, there is no conflict in one's mind between the good and the sacred. Both these modes are self-contained, sustainable and consistent; but I find myself wondering what Plutarch would have thought of us.

VII

One of Plutarch's most characteristic works is his essay *On Superstition*, which begins with these words:

> The flood of ignorance and misunderstanding of the gods has divided from the very beginning into two separate streams. One, flowing as it were over stony ground, has in hard dispositions produced atheism; the other, as if over moist soil, has in tender minds produced superstition.
>
> (trans. by L. R. Loomis, Classics Club Editions)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And then, although he himself was in so many ways the most "tender-minded" of writers, and one of the most sincerely religious people who have ever lived, Plutarch, in confronting this antithetical pair of spiritual vices, says that we must come down unequivocally harder against superstition than against atheism. Throughout this essay he reiterates that it is better to believe nothing about the gods than to hold superstitious beliefs about them—among which, of course, he counted the belief that they could ever be pleased by human sacrifice, or by bloodshed of any sort. If he could observe us today, I suspect that Plutarch would say that virtually all modern people are hopelessly enmeshed in one of these twin snares, atheism or superstition. Either we ignore the gods, for all practical purposes, or we adhere mindlessly and slavishly to some arbitrary *cultus*, and thereby mutilate our own essence, our humanity, with a shameful lack of regard for our own dignity.

No, Plutarch would not have liked our Fundamentalists: it is worth remarking that the very word he uses (*δεισιδαιμονΐα* [*deisidaimonia*]) conventionally rendered by the Latinate "superstition," literally means "god-fearing"—a word which has always had such favorable connotations in Judaism and its derivative religions. But I am not sure that he would have seen much difference between modern religious liberals and the atheists of his own time: decidedly preferable to the superstitious, no doubt, but chiefly valuable for their negative virtues: their lack of fanaticism and their freedom from religiously-grounded fear. Soft-hearted though he was, there is always in Plutarch a solid sense of inner character, of that capacity for making hard choices which is what makes us human. He has been most remembered, after all, for those ever-fresh and endlessly inspiring *Lives*; and while it has become a vice of modern religious liberalism to avoid being "judgmental," especially about other peoples' practices, religious or otherwise, some of the men whose lives Plutarch wrote did not shrink from passing judgment on the proclivities of the gods themselves.

The men of those transitional times discovered that there is at least one other way of being both religious and conscientious, a way equally distinct from the archaic mentality of abject submission to arbitrary power (which all Fundamentalisms tend

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to perpetuate) and from the New Age (really new in Plutarch's time, and still calling itself "new" in our own!) of generally pacific, but rather flaccid and loose-jointed benevolence. Their consciences had come to be at odds with their religion. They inhabited a radically unsettled world: they were still at sea between two distinct moral continents, and they had as yet no assurance that they would arrive safely at the more comfortable shore. For they still believed in their old gods—whether Yahweh, Jupiter, or Dionysus the Devourer—and they still held, by and large, the traditional views of their powers and appetites. Yet even while believing that human sacrifice was something that the gods desired very much, they chose, more often than not, to withhold it from them, forfeiting the favors which they believed it would purchase, and even putting themselves (as they thought) at mortal risk from the displeasure of those as-yet-unreformed "powers above."

It is not easy for us to take the measure of such men, because we have so largely lost the sense of being subject to the power of gods who are morally inferior to ourselves; gods who must be taken seriously, but who are also somehow contemptible, against whom we must marshal our best efforts: to educate them, eventually, but in the meantime (a "meantime" which lasted, as we have seen, for at least some hundreds of years) to resist, thwart, or circumvent them as far as humanly possible. Whence came this impulse to withhold human sacrifice? We may never find a certain answer to that question, since the impulse first made itself felt so long before anything like a philosophically articulated theology had arisen to give human values some semblance of clarity. And where did the men of those times find the spirit to play their daring game with the murderous gods, the courage to impose so resolutely, and in the end so successfully, this protracted embargo on heaven? . . . *O admirabile commercium!* That may be the greatest mystery of all, a mystery in the fullest sense of the word, a mystery of progress.

Progress and mystery are two words which do not sit comfortably side by side. Progress is associated with enlightenment, clarification, the elucidation of the obscure; by mystery we usually mean something irrational in human beings which defies lucid explanation. Yet here we find, at the very start of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the most dramatically progressive leap in human religious history, a mystery. How did men make such a leap when neither reason nor faith gave them any encouragement to do so? I do not know. No doubt historians can illuminate some details of this miracle by pointing to various material conditions—social, economic, political—all of which played some part in it, and which have something like their own evolutionary laws; but ultimately the question will remain, I think, not quite reducible to them. I can find no better description of it, after all, than a mystery of progress, a mystery of the human heart.

How then shall we judge such men as Themistocles, or King Saul? We who are the heirs of their struggles can only recall them with gratitude and wonder. Wonder not that under such mortal stresses as the Persian Wars, or the Punic, the embargo was sometimes broken, and the occasional human victim sent furtively to heaven; rather should we marvel that it happened so seldom: that men who could expect no reward for their virtue held the line as well as they did; and that when they did give in, under pressure, to the sanguinary demands of the gods (which after all had all the support of tradition and precedent) they still regarded it as a failure on their own part, and that such occasions were remembered ever after (if they were remembered at all) with loathing and shame.

No, I will not condemn Themistocles, a Greek hero in the mould of Odysseus, who always applied his reason where it would be most effective—though I deplore, as he did, the panic which brought the Athenians to such a dreadful moment. And certainly I will not revile King Saul, who in establishing the Hebrew monarchy created one of the core institutions around which the religion of Israel eventually civilized itself. These were only two of the human participants in that millennial endeavor, that long, loud and ultimately fruitful conversation among gods and men, including men of many different races, classes and types. Prophets, priests, kings and commanders all took part in this dialogue. Some of their parts may be identified with fair precision, but it is not always possible to assign unambiguous praise or blame: many details escape us now. We can only gratefully remember that, in at least one particular facet of our lives, the human race at that time changed itself, irrevocably, for the better.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

VIII

The Russian novelist Dmitri Merezhkovsky, in his crankish but intermittently illuminating book on the myth of Atlantis, tells of a Russian peasant, late in the nineteenth century, who killed his son because he had "heard" the voice of God commanding him to re-enact the sacrifice of Isaac. This unhappy peasant, Mikhail Kourtin by name, committed suicide in prison before his case was adjudicated. But it is impossible to believe that even in Holy Russia, pitied and patronized then as now for being the most backward and obscurantist country in Europe, he would ever have been sentenced as a sane man, nor his religious vision taken seriously. What in Plutarch's time could still be seen as a possible form of collective madness would now be recognized only as the insanity of an individual. This is one measure of the moral revolution wrought by the men of the period we have been discussing; but it is also a sign of how largely we have "succeeded" in forgetting what we have inherited from them. The idea that human sacrifice is simply unthinkable has so fully permeated our religious consciousness that I dare say there is now among us no Fundamentalist so benighted that, should he hear ever so clearly that inner voice which spoke to Abraham, should he even see the same light which the prophet Euphrantides saw before Salamis, he would not sooner believe that he was hallucinating than that this was the true voice and the true sign of God. But it is good for us to remember, sometimes, that it was not always so, and to recall to ourselves the courage of those men who stood against that command when the best course of action was not, as it has become with us, a foregone conclusion. It is of such resolution that all progress has been made—whenever it has truly been progress, and not the blind careering course of impersonal historical trends.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Peace after Long Sickness

At first you would visit me
only a few minutes at a time.
The door opened and you entered
—you and pain, like two guests
who know each other by accident.
Then you began to stay.
Sometimes you glanced at your wrist
subtly, disguising the gesture
in a series of chores and fidgets,
and I felt a pang of jealousy.
Soon you were passing the night
in the metal chair, dozing all day
like me, plying the edges of a trance.
When I woke, I saw you open the curtains,
you closed them while I slept.
I could no longer imagine this room
without your slightly sagging shoulders.
I explained the mysteries of my fever
to you, how it was like being on a train,
feeling motionless and then watching
tall houses recede, but instead of walls
flying past me, there were years,
days, seconds. You nodded and in turn
told me the story how we became lovers:
rain, the suntan lotion leaking
in a soaked picnic hamper,
a barn, the straw absurdly hard
like an armchair with broken springs
—afterwards, we found lumps of coal
imbedded in it—and as you spoke
it was if it had been true always,
I felt my life taking root

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the breath that shaped your words.
When I asked for news of our city
you paused, genuinely trying to remember,
running your fingers through my hair.
I knew it was the winter of the riots,
but it was as if I'd read the words
in a phrasebook in a foreign language.
You sang to me. You were so close
if I shut my eyes you were no closer,
and the pain was very remote,
a silhouette in a dazzling window
deeper in the maze of hospitals.

Crossing the Ark Mountains

Our map showed a straight line
to Hebron but the road forked
again and again with no sign,
sometimes a branch twisted back
to indicate a favorable direction,
sometimes only the gleam of the aspen.
We kept climbing. Again and again
the spruce wall opened on a wider horizon,
a sparser foreground, a greater remove
from the tiny ruled fields.
The moon rose and at last
I stopped for directions at a farm.
I stepped over a child's toys,
a dry wading pool, a rope coil,
finding the glint in the goldenrod
where bodies had passed.
I came to the open door and knocked
gently, not to close it.
A blind dog came padding
and licked my hand in silence.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I thought I heard the squeak
of a cradle being rocked
and the hum of wasps.
At last I turned and the dog
sighed heavily and thumped down.
I walked back careful
of the doll's shoes soaked with rain,
the wheels, the spokes, the wagon.
You were waiting in the car,
your face streaked with tears.
Was it the evening in my eyes
that made you turn away?
We kept climbing and I was angry
that I could not give you happiness,
could not bring you the promise
of the valley where lights
had begun to flicker, a lamp,
high beams, the invisible windows
kindling one by one, pinpricks
into a world of pure fire.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WILLIAM BAER

The Cuban Girl

Perhaps tonight. Even though this city night
is nothing but an eerie, shadowed maze . . .
he wanders through the Lower East Side streets
confused, without the pain, and strangely calm,
searching under the bluish city lights,
and down the darkened alleys, across the roofs;
wanting very little, just another glimpse
across those decades lost and unredeemed.

But nothing at all's the same. He's waited too long
to come back now—but sees, across the street,
the girl who looks like her. She passes by,
lovely, yet far less beautiful. For him,
there's nothing left, until he stops and hears,
hears something he recalls—some distant rumble
lightly shakes the ground, the subway fades
away—the night is empty once again,
he feels his cancer move. Perhaps tonight.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SUZANNE RHODENBAUGH

Preparing for Immortality

to Wendell Berry

Against the north wall of the darkest
least-used room, I've placed the golden oak
barrister's bookcase. It's not all that unusual,

but fair enough for grace. It will save from ruin
my work. The slim obscure literary journals,
the tearsheets, the two very limited editions
surely someone will notice and care for?
A pastoralist, a late one,
I wish I'd found, cut and carved

the oak myself, and fitted the glass,
re-scarring my sundarkened callused hands
badly in the doing, and worked the lemon oil

into the wood and carried the finished case
on my back for miles to a cabin in a wood
I paid for, over years, by cutting wood
for others, and put the case in a place of honor,
it being my most prized possession in a homeplace
of few belongings, and run my fingers daily over

the swirling grain, and had a son and a daughter
who pointed out the case to others, saying proudly
My mother made that; and had the sure knowledge

the case would be handed down for generations,
starting with my son, a fine lawyer
for those without a voice of their own:
loggers in the Great Northwest
who've lost their jobs and don't know why and go on
hurting, and wanting what they call their *way of life*,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

though it sometimes wrests life from others—
woodland creatures, and the heritage of all of us
—nothing is ever simple, is it? In my life,

the bookcase was a simple purchase.
I bought it with money my husband earned
for a house already full of antiques.
It's a brick duplex, in the city.
I've never lived in the great woods,
or any woods at all.

I'm no kind of carpenter.
My daughter seldom writes or calls.
My only son is in prison.

And whether I plead *mea culpa*,
or whether I stand mute,
flat unanswerable facts
reside with me, in a city.
I've built it over a chasm
out of the wilderness within:

anger, sorrow, guilt and blame.
They'll never be homeless
while I'm alive. Alive

must suffice as a case for me.
It contains what I'm sure I hold—
my husband's hands across a known table;
the food I cook and serve with wine.
If you ever visit—and you're welcome—
we must, in this life, talk.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BARBARA HELFGOTT HYETT

Two Snakes

Shot from the bow of his insistence,
flung into sunlight with a sound
like tearing silk, he touches her
mouth with his head. Her tongue is
flicking. Already she moves away.

Now they work their heads like two
stones sparking, his length climbing
the stairs of her, sliding up until even
the thin tips of their tails are twining,
untwining. He is thumping upon her
to be let in.

He lifts himself from her body
and in that blackness his penis
appears, everted, unlidded,
pink as the underpetals of a rose,
the foam of his being pouring
from him into less, and less.

They rest, coiled on one another,
her head lifted as a Sphinx.
They are wrapped in quiet
breathing. They are snakes.

In the grass, they wind toward
the hollow of a tree; the birds,
startled, flying outward one by one.
This is the graspable Eden: requited
in all of its urgings; life declaring itself
in opposition—*For me! For me!*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JIM HENLEY

Ozymandias III

Some sect has built a pretty big cathedral
beside the Beltway near Washington, D.C.
You come upon the granite, tetrahedral
monolith—unbroken by stained glass
and luminous in floodlights after dark—
as you drive beneath a railroad overpass
on which some local wag once famously
spray-painted: "SURRENDER DOROTHY!"

You can just see the outline overhead
now. It seems some member of the sect
climbed up there too, and chipped away each mark
right through the bridge's own paint. A pale red
ghost of graffiti still survives, in fact,
on the bare metal where the rust has bled.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Re-Radicalizing Graham

FORGERIES ARE ALMOST AS HARD TO MAKE as the real thing. And, as bitter experience in the art market has demonstrated, you frequently can't tell even an inept one from the real thing until you put them side by side. While it may be inconvenient to lug a painting from one city or country to another, in dance you can't even run that test. It's unlikely to find two productions of the same dance close together in time, and even then, you have only your memory to compare one with the other. The dance before us, for all intents and purposes, is the only dance there is. And if that dance seems to be going astray, there's practically no way to say exactly where and how it became inauthentic, or for what reasons. I'm talking about revivals of old dances, of course, and these seem to take up an increasing space in the modern repertory. Not all dance reproductions are forgeries, but we're easily taken in by things that bear some likeness to the originals. In cases like Brooklyn Academy's "Radical Graham" project, we want to be taken in.

The two-week season (September 28–October 9, 1994) promised a rich retrospective by Graham's company, which is still looking for a survival formula four years after its founder's death. Besides a couple of lesser late works, there were seven solos and group dances from Graham's early, "long woolens" period, and eight of her most important theater pieces from the "Greek" period. But almost everything seemed compromised, as if those in charge of Graham's legacy now consider these artifacts ineffective, and are striving to convert them into more successful simulacra of themselves. The label "Radical" is one of the most obvious ways to rehabilitate a has-been or mount political correctness onto its opposite, as in Radical Chic. Graham certainly was radical in her first ten years as a choreographer. Then, for another ten years, she was devastatingly theatrical. I saw almost nothing in the dances at BAM that showed why this was, since the most radical qualities of Graham were precisely those that the company took pains to disguise or de-emphasize.

Change is considered an inalienable right in dance, and we know that Martha Graham changed her dances without a qualm, while carefully burying whatever traces of previous versions might have been left behind. Our main resource for comparing alternatives is film, when it's available. But Martha Graham's films have their own authenticity problems. She destroyed and suppressed old films,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

refilming many dances late in her career so that vintage records she considered inadequate would not slip out to represent her. In a new book on the Graham technique, dance scholar Alice Helpern laments the choreographer's blackout attitude on historical documentation. Helpern located a large cache of unpublished Barbara Morgan photographs of dancers demonstrating the technique, and with great trepidation used them in her book. "Is it blasphemous to think [they were kept hidden] because Graham never wanted these pictures shown?" Helpern wonders.[1] People do feel reverent about Graham, and eventually the ritual respect inhibits close scrutiny.

Martha Graham's command over her image was absolute in her lifetime. In her eighties and nineties, after she had left the stage herself and began reviving her old works on a big scale, she became glitzier, more literal. She continued smoothing out and balleticizing the technique, a process she started much earlier. She humanized the interactions that had formerly been abstract and enigmatic. Her late dances, understandably derivative, reflected the more sensationalistic aspects of the early ones. At the end everything seemed to be sliding back to the vaudevillian mysticism Graham learned and rejected from Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. It seems to me this après-Denishawn aesthetic is what the present Graham direction is following, rather than any earlier, more rigorous conception of her work.

There are ways in which I want a reconstruction to look dated. The whole idea of reconstruction, which is dance's equivalent of creating a museum, is to show us where we've been. At a time when creative talent is more scarce than ever, dance companies need novelties, and revisiting the literature is a good way to supply this need. Left intact, more or less as they were created, old dances can give density and texture to a repertory, and interpretive challenges to the dancers. Even if one has no regard for history as such, good choreography of any era is a model for the field and a thrill to the audience, but the way must be prepared for it.

At BAM when the curtain went up on Isamu Noguchi's landscape for *Dark Meadow* (1946), an open space dotted with smooth, jutting shapes, the audience could barely stifle its snickers. Phallic symbols are no longer mysterious, or even potent, they're just another cabaret joke. So while Noguchi and Graham were setting the stage for a ritual, we are set for something else.

Dark Meadow is the most severe of Graham's crypto-mytho-dance dramas. It doesn't even offer the rescuing device of character that its nearest relatives do. *Herodiade* (1944) and *Deaths and Entrances* (1943) are just as oblique about meaning, but they have women more or less plausible to us—Herodias and her attendant, the Brontë sisters—

[1] THE TECHNIQUE OF MARTHA GRAHAM, by *Alice Helpern*. Morgan & Morgan Publishing. $25.00p.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

confronting themselves or each other. The dancers seize these possibilities and the audience cheers with recognition. *Dark Meadow*, on the other hand, has archetypes, people—barely people—stalking around, offering strange objects, cowering or asserting, curling into erotic but static shapes. Why they do this, only we must determine. *Dark Meadow* is one of my favorite Graham dances, chiefly because it has so much open space in it. All the audience got was a brief, poetic program note of encouragement, but what it needed even more was consistently poetic performances.

Clytemnestra (1958) stands at the other end of the "Greek" cycle. Extravagant, complex, and as explicit as Graham ever got, it retells what seems like the whole of the *Oresteia* in three long acts. There are so many characters, so many stories, flashbacks, portents, props, that you give up tracking them and simply content yourself with the spectacle of it all. Yet despite the blood-and-thunder, at BAM *Clytemnestra* seemed inert to me, encased in glass like those dioramas of Eskimos hunting in the Museum of Natural History. Everything was there except the breath of life. This often seems to happen when dancers have to recreate an unfamiliar but famous dance. They move too carefully from shape to shape, in an effort to create the right picture. But it's shocking to think that Graham's own company can't find a way to make these movements appear natural. With the exception of Christine Dakin, who was spellbinding in *Clytemnestra*, *Cave of the Heart*, and *Errand into the Maze*, the principal dancers either did nothing with their roles in the Greek pieces, or labored at them with ferocious and unvarying intensity.

Minor production changes were only momentarily jarring—the glitter dust on the ribbon of jealousy that Medea swallows in *Cave*, the orange ruffles enveloping the Bride in *Appalachian Spring*—but the season taken as a whole came across as overcompensated. When new costumes are made now, they imitate not Graham's original designs but the sexier, more luxurious Halston redesigns. The orchestra, under Stanley Sussman's direction, was so heavily miked and amplified that you could hear pages turning, singers clearing their throats. Hoked-up, electrified music is the style, I know, but this was no improvement over tapes. Worse, all the early dances have been rescored for larger and lusher ensembles. The company doesn't seem to have the nerve to play the music in its original form. Is this because they don't want us to think Martha ever had to save money by using a chamber orchestra? Economy may well have necessitated the open harmonics and breathy woodwind/percussion sounds of her thirties dances, but those sounds belong to American music as much as to Graham's imagery. They identify the spirit of a whole era.

El Penitente (1940), for example, was a consciously naive version of a folk passion, a mystery play as it might have been put on by penitential Christians whom Graham saw on her visits to the South-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

west. She wasn't trying to recreate anything literally, but to make an artwork with the power and pathos of a Diego Rivera mural or a Carlos Chavez symphony. The dance looked almost OK, but the movement ideas had become diffuse—curving paths and connections where there used to be sharp angles and straight lines—and the characters sentimentalized. Mario Camacho and Miki Orihara as the Penitent and the Woman enacted the bits of scripture—the Temptation and Fall, the Stations of the Cross, the Crucifixion—with sympathetic naturalism, like Method actors.

El Penitente, and Louis Horst's music for it, belonged to the genre of American primitivism. The characters are crudely worked out, childlike, earnest in their belief. Graham's Christ Figure was conceived as a giant. Masked, paternal, he walks on halftoe, one step at a time, precariously but securely balanced and hovering over his sinning children. Peter London tried to make each step a high kick, so although *he* seemed to be doing great dancer-tricks, the *character* looked destabilized, wobbly, weak—just the opposite of the benign presence Graham created. Graham may have been "essentializing" the peasant soul here, but at the time this kind of primitivism was meant as a tribute to courage, innocence and simple faith. Modernized, it's not only uninteresting, but untrue to the original concept.

The oldest dances suffered the most from this refurbishing sophistry. Fortunately I did not see the solo *Lamentation* in triplicate, which I understand was staged for opening night. I did, however, see the version of *Celebration* (1934), with five male dancers added to its ten women, all fifteen of them in silky white, virtually topless Donna Karan sarongs. No one was credited with this adaptation, and the program note assures us that the company sees it now as a display of virtuosity: "At the time *Celebration* was choreographed, Martha Graham would do a preparatory 400 jumps at the barre in five minutes. *Celebration* took its inspiration from that incredibly taxing warm-up, having, as it did originally, 12 women doing 457 jumps in six minutes." This awestruck worship of technique is the trigger-reflex of a fan, not a curator.

In the intermission I overheard: "It's totally about, you know, enjoying your body and what it can do." Well, yes. But *Celebration* as a dance of women is more. Healthy co-ed gymnastics and lovely caring women dances are all around us—but this was not Graham's line then. Hers was fierce female power, dionysiac joy that was neither provoked nor licensed by gazing males. Energy of such dynamism could be dangerous even today, which is probably why you don't see it much.

Heretic (1929) and *Primitive Mysteries* (1931), as well as the solos *Deep Song* (1937) and *Satyric Festival Song* (1932), retained their all-female character, but they looked flabby, except for Dakin's dancing of *Deep Song*. Janet Eilber returned to the company for *Satyric*, newly put together by Diane Gray. The shadow of naturalistic acting lay on all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

these works, and Eilber had an especially hard job. Dance comedy is often even more subtly the property of its originator than serious work. Graham's comic dances, I think, were usually self-parodies. If another dancer were to imitate her timing, mannerisms, and affectations, it would be an act of disrespect. But Eilber smirked and telegraphed *Satyric*'s pantomimic gestures and flaunting zigzags, looking neither like Graham nor anything else. I guess she couldn't find another credible way to interpret them.

I liked Eilber's portrayal of the "doom-eager" protagonist in *Herodiade* much better. Graham's dramatic dances now come through better on the whole than the earlier ones. Not only do they provide some kind of psychological rationale for contemporary dancers to relate to, but the choreography itself is more integrated with character and mise en scène. To take liberties with a dance like *Errand* or *Cave*, except in small ways, you'd not only smudge the façade, but shake loose a whole edifice of meaning. The early works, on the other hand, come from a different set of objectives. The movement is simpler, starker, more direct. It's composed in rather self-contained units with lots of repetition, and chunks of action that could almost be put in a different sequence or dropped out without perceptible gaps. The characters are more like ideas than three-dimensional people, and the ensemble moves in unison or unified subgroups rather than according to a more naturalistic dramaturgy.

This harsh abstractionism is one of Graham's truly radical qualities. It belongs to other dance experimenters of the 1920s and 1930s and exemplifies their determination to be "modern." It is idealistic, fervent, and metaphorical. To treat the few works that remain from this era like technical displays of postminimalism, as the Graham company seems to be doing, is to misrepresent their mission, their place in history.

Chronicle (1937) is the most recent and most problematic of the resurrected early works. It was a complex dance from what appears to be the only political phase of Graham's creative life. She made a start on restoring it at the very end of her life, and two more of its missing pieces have now been reconstituted, by a legion of current and former Graham dancers. Still using the idea of abstract movement, Graham suggested the forebodings of war, the aimlessness of the unemployed, and the mobilization of national energies that would overcome the fascist threat. Once again she used masses of women surging forward shoulder to shoulder, standing sturdily in affirmation, jumping straight into the air with arms yanked back as if firing weapons. It's a dance I could have seen many times.

Watching it only once required too many perceptual adjustments. For one thing, the music seems to have nothing to do with it, even though an original score was commissioned from the American composer Wallingford Riegger. When Graham embarked on reviving

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the section "Steps in the Street," she shocked me by appropriating music Riegger wrote for her greatest rival, Doris Humphrey: the Variations and Conclusion from *New Dance*, commissioned by Humphrey only a year earlier. I don't know the real story about this, since the Graham company does not give out details of its reconstruction process. It's thought that Riegger's *Chronicle* score was lost. The *New Dance* music, written for two pianos, was galvanic, rhythmically ingenious, and severe in that parsimonious way I mentioned earlier. Humphrey made an exhilarating dance to it—a dance, incidentally, that was also about the disheveled state of the world and the possible ways society might overcome its confusions.

The Grahams are using a fully orchestrated score (credited to Justin Dello Joio, although Riegger himself made one in 1940), played so fast you can't hear the rhythms and the dancers are hard-pressed to keep up with them. In any case, the choreography adheres to only the bare outlines of the music, not its dense, irregular counterpoint as Humphrey did. Lines of women lurch forward, arms outstretched like sleepwalkers, or stagger with one arm twisted up toward the head. Unseeing, they stand behind a would-be leader, who seems to exhort them by insistently beating a flexed foot against her ankle. This motif was also used first by Humphrey, in the women's section of *New Dance*, only Humphrey's leader succeeded in drawing her companions out of their isolation into unity. Graham's solo figure doesn't take command of the others, so she remains a nonconformist in their midst.

"Prelude to Action," the last section, interwove the small groups and had a fine excitement, but, perhaps still rankled about *New Dance*, I felt the choreography and the music were unrelated, melodramatic, discordant somehow. Contemporary accounts describe now-missing flags and banners in *Chronicle*, especially in this rousing finale. Remember the date. War fever was starting to build, spurring people out of their depression blues. Stanley Sussman's orchestration of the music was more like the soundtrack for one of Roosevelt's TVA promotion films than a proletarian call to arms.

Terese Capucilli danced the first part, "Spectre—1914," originally a creepy solo in which Graham held the audience spellbound with a big black dress she wound around herself or draped over a kind of tiered throne. In a contemporary photograph, she twists her arms up close to her head, her stern face turned away. Her hands are fists. She could be a conjuror, or an impassioned Spanish dancer. Capucilli is intense, but she's not powerful in the way Graham was, even in pictures. Pathos may be more successful today than rage, but it isn't early Graham.

Dance history has always been elusive, but the marketing mania of today's dance world, combined with our sophisticated methods of doctoring the news, has made it almost impossible to know the past. In a 1994 documentary of Graham on PBS's "American Masters" series,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

there's a clip of the "Steps in the Street" revival, with the overheated *New Dance* music. The image dissolves into Louis Horst at the piano, and the orchestra suddenly becomes piano music. Was Horst actually playing *New Dance*? If so, why? And when? Horst quit as Graham's musical director around 1948 and died in 1964. I don't know when this bit of film was shot. Could Riegger himself actually have recycled *New Dance* for Graham? Did nobody notice? Or is the Horst "performance" on film just another casual overdub, placed to make it seem he had a hand in borrowing this music for Graham? Are these mere scholarly quibbles?

Fifty-seven years ago, the year of *Chronicle*, Wallingford Riegger contributed to a thin book of appreciations of Graham edited by Merle Armitage.[2] Riegger called *Chronicle* "the choreographic embodiment of the most eloquent sermon, the most searching analysis, the most scathing indictment of the great scourge of mankind." Riegger went on to plead for a greater use of film to preserve the work of dancers. "The tragedy of Miss Graham's art is that like all dancing it is bound up with time and space, that is, ephemeral unless it can in some way be fixed." Actually, "Steps in the Street" was filmed, by the ethnographic filmmaker Julien Bryan, and the silent footage greatly assisted in the present revival, but it cannot be shown to the public except with special dispensation from the Graham company. Fifteen seconds of "Spectre—1914," presumably excised from a longer and still invisible version, shows us a demonic Graham, long hair flying, beating the floor with her fist as she sits on her throne.

"The composer writes a score which future generations may play," wrote Riegger. "The art of dancers is literally interred with their bones." I wonder what he would have thought of the spectacle of musical buccaneering, glamourous dancing, tarted-up classics, patchwork and outright invention that represents Graham today.

[2] *Martha Graham*, ed. by Merle Armitage (New York, 1937, reprinted 1966), pp. 36–39.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RICHARD HORNBY

Aging Actresses

A GOOD BROADWAY MUSICAL, the critics used to insist, is supposed to be "integrated," a term that refers not to the racial makeup of the cast, but to the relation of the music, dance, and spectacle to the book. In the bad old days before *Oklahoma!* (or was it *Show Boat*?), Broadway musicals were put together in piecemeal fashion. Howard Taubman complained in 1949 of "the threadbare formula of preposterous plot, unrelated tunes, a dash of comedy, and girls, girls, girls." Instead of being subordinated to the book, everything was subordinated to the songs, which could be created as vehicles for a star singer, or tossed in to suit prevalent fads (1930s musicals, even when set in New York or London, always had to have a Latin number), or recycled from a previous show, or even "interpolated" by an outside composer. (Gershwin's first Broadway hit song was "Swanee," interpolated into a Sigmund Romberg musical for Al Jolson.) If the production was a hit, audiences left the theatre singing the tunes; pretty soon, they were being sung everywhere, detached from the show.

In the modern "book" musical, however, all the elements of production arise from the script. Taubman rejoiced that musicals of the forties, influenced by *Oklahoma!*, at last "sought to fuse music and action into an integrated stage work." Music critic for the *New York Times* and later its theatre critic, he was promulgating Wagner's ideal of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (integrated art work). Never mind that most of the great theatrical works of Rodgers and Hart, the Gershwins, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin were not integrated. Never mind that serious theorists of drama, like Brecht, had rejected the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, seeing value in having elements stand alone, or even being oddly juxtaposed. A musical was still supposed to be integrated if it was to be any good.

Well, Andrew Lloyd Webber's musicals are integrated with a vengeance. Music, dance, and spectacle all arise from the book; you could no more interpolate a song into a Webber musical than you could get in to see it for under fifty dollars. The book is treated with reverence; who but Sir Andrew could create a musical (*Cats*) based on poems by T. S. Eliot? The settings, though spectacular, are all faithful to the book in atmosphere; indeed, an inflated, unified, moody elegance is the hallmark of a Webber piece. Dancing, if any, is likely to be ballroom or balletic in style rather than jazzy; the chorus, instead of just girls, girls, girls, are individually characterized and dressed appropriately. Finally, the musical numbers are wordy and thoughtful; if traditionally songs stopped the show, Sir Andrew's move it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

along as sung dialogue, recitative. (A few years ago, a student in one of my seminars was giving a report on Webber; the student, an ardent fan, noted that *Phantom of the Opera* used no spoken dialogue at all, a sensational innovation. An older student, dozing at the back, raised himself and asked dourly, "You mean, like opera?") The result is that you do not emerge from the theatre singing the songs—in fact, you cannot even remember them. And, aside from one or two numbers from *Cats*, nobody sings Webber's tunes in concerts, in clubs, on the radio, or in the shower. They are so well integrated as to be inseparable from the show, homogenized, prosaic, lifeless. Songs from Broadway musicals used to be a major part of our culture, delighting millions. Now, prisoners of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the songs serve plot and character, meekly staying in the background like Muzak.

Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Sunset Boulevard*, based on the movie, concerns an aging female movie star who has been dropped by Hollywood. In a case of life imitating art, Sir Andrew successively dumped two of its stars, Patti LuPone and Faye Dunaway, before bringing the show to Broadway in November. LuPone, who played the lead in London, was perhaps too young (44) for the role of Norma Desmond, played in the film by Gloria Swanson; LuPone was also told she was too tall. ("I'm five foot two," she snorted. "Who do they want—Linda Hunt?") Dunaway, about the same age as Swanson when the film was made, was told she was not a good enough singer, though the real reason was probably that, announced to take over the role from Glenn Close in Los Angeles, she sold few advance tickets. With aging actresses, audiences are as fickle as producers are cruel.

The 1950 movie of *Sunset Boulevard* is the darkest of film noir, overlaid with director Billy Wilder's sardonic humor. (The original script even began with Joe Gillis' dead body conversing with another corpse in the morgue, which was just too outré for the studio executives of the time.) Webber's musical version emerges as a nostalgic period piece, with no humor whatsoever. On the one hand, the book, by Don Black and Christopher Hampton (who also co-wrote the lyrics), follows the movie script rather too closely, so that you are constantly amazed at the staging. (How are they going to handle the car chase? What will they do about the swimming pool?) Trevor Nunn's direction is ingenious, as is John Napier's grandiose set, which includes a seventeen-ton interior of Desmond's house that both flies and rolls. But on the other hand, the musical pulls the teeth of the original. Where William Holden was feckless and opportunistic as Gillis, Alan Campbell comes off as a nice guy down on his luck. Where Swanson appeared still talented and sexy, though cruelly forgotten, Close, overly made-up to the point of looking mummified, is a wreck of any former self. Thus, where Swanson had a terrifying magnetism, Close is merely pathetic; when she weepily shoots Campbell, you feel like buying her an ice cream cone to cheer her up. Only George Hearn, a fine actor in the role of Max the butler, recaptures the ominous quality of Eric von Stroheim in the film.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But the worst problem, as always, is the music. The overture, for example, introduces a bluesy theme song reminiscent of any number of films noirs, but orchestrated around strings rather than brass, which makes it sound drowsy and cloying. The rest of the score is a pastiche of past musicals, echoing the tunes of the great songwriters, but without their unique vitality. Webber does not know how to *develop* a piece of music. He will take a phrase and repeat it endlessly, occasionally with some trite modulation, but most of the time without even that. The traditional Broadway song had a strict form: a talky, restrained verse making the transition from the spoken dialogue to the song proper, a 32-bar chorus that stands apart as a recognizable entity. Webber's music, by contrast, sprawls all over the place; you wait for the chorus that never comes. Most of the time the music supports "lyrics" like the following: "I want to spare you a lot of sadness. I don't know what he's told you, but I can guarantee you, he doesn't live with mother, or what you'd call a roommate. He's just a . . . I can't say it." This is a song? Traditional Broadway lyrics might often have been corny or hackneyed, but at least they were recognizable as lyrics; these, which are of Norma on the phone to Gillis' girlfriend, are indistinguishable from dialogue. It is hard even to tell where such numbers begin or end; talk turns into song, and vice versa, with the music slinking in and out like an uninvited guest. By coincidence, the same week I saw *Sunset Boulevard*, I was reading Mary Ellin Barrett's recent, lovely memoir of her father, Irving Berlin. She writes of how Berlin labored over his scores, despite their easy, spontaneous sound, with the result that "the entertainment took off and built, the way a good show will, number by number." Will we ever have such musicals again?

Another aging American actress is Julie Harris, who starred in a revival of *The Glass Menagerie* at the Roundabout, on the fiftieth anniversary of the original opening of the play in 1944. I had never before seen her on the stage. Her television and film work is unimpressive, but sometimes great stage actors cannot adjust to the camera. Her name was always spoken in hushed tones when I was young, as if she were something special and wonderful, and her five Tony Awards must amount to something.

Now, having seen her Amanda in Tennessee Williams' classic, I am at a loss to say what. If she had brilliance years ago, most of it is gone. Decades of acting only once in a while, and then usually in one-person shows, which can be bad for an actor, may have sapped her talent. She does have expressive eyes, her greatest acting strength, but her voice, though basically adequate, thins out in emotional scenes to a high squeak. Nor does she move particularly well; Amanda says she "won the cakewalk" as a young woman, but Harris did not even try to demonstrate it, nor glide like someone who was proud of her bearing. Influenced by the Method acting approach of the Actors Studio, she is slow, gushy, and introspective on stage. Important moments go unpointed; at the climax of the play, when she is berating Tom for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

selfishly wanting to leave home, Amanda, who has forbidden both her children to use the word "crippled" in reference to Laura's bad leg, cries, "Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who's crippled and has no job!" Audiences usually gasp at the key word here, but Harris let it slide by in a rush of generalized emotion, so that no one noticed.

The production as a whole, directed by Frank Galati, had strengths as well as weaknesses. Loy Arcenas' set recaptured the cheerless world of the thirties and the Wingfields' desperate apartment. I was also pleased to see the slide projections, left out of the original production and often cut since, restored. Williams studied at the New School with Erwin Piscator, inventor of the Epic Theatre style of production that used such devices to distance the audience emotionally. Williams' plays become mawkish when you omit such elements, or overlook his humor and genuine gift for language. The poorer actors (Harris, and Željko Ivanek as Tom) tended to use a vague dreaminess where Williams is actually emotionally precise. Amanda can be genuinely witty at times, though you would never have known it here, while Tom is supposed to be sardonic rather than woozy. Calista Flockhart as Laura had the same problem of wishy-washyness until the Gentleman Caller scene, meticulously yet ardently played with the first-rate Kevin Kilner as the Caller.

Given the sad examples of actresses aging ungracefully on Broadway, it was reassuring to see two female Britons *d'un certain âge* give socko performances in *Vita & Virginia*, an epistolary play about the love affair between Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf. Vanessa Redgrave and Eileen Atkins starred as Vita and Virginia, respectively, in the Union Square Theatre production, put together by Atkins from the subjects' actual correspondence. Redgrave as Vita, tall, vigorous, beautifully spoken, bestrode the small stage like a colossus, epitomizing 1920s bohemianism, aestheticism, and sexual freedom. Atkins, who in real life is quite attractive, made Virginia Woolf seem as homely and dowdy as she does in her photographs; then, with Atkins' beautiful, resonant voice, and her witty, spontaneous manner, she won you over as easily as she did Vita.

No one knows how sexual the women's relationship actually was. Woolf, sexually abused as a child, was sexually frigid as an adult. Sackville-West did say in a letter to her husband that the two had gone to bed, which may not have been the standard euphemism for sex but merely the literal truth. In any case, the emotional connection between the women was clearly more important than the physical. Redgrave and Atkins, under the direction of Zoe Caldwell, portrayed this vividly. At one point, Atkins, seated on the floor, embraced Redgrave's knees, and at another, she stroked her hair, but mostly the two just took delight in each other's ideas and imagination. Though of the same sex, there was much here of an attraction of opposites, the one dashing, beautiful, unconventional, the other quiet, amused, outwardly undistinguished. (When Atkins smiled broadly in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

curtain call and, without any change in costume or makeup, became her beautiful self, it was like a trick with mirrors.)

Ultimately, however, the script caused problems. Using actual letters certainly provided a good feel for the period, with its literary landscape of Gertrude Stein and T. S. Eliot, the Sitwells, Lytton Strachey, Duncan Grant, and Leonard Woolf, but it also gave the piece a relatively flat structure. The women's relationship has a few minor ups and downs, the latter mostly jealousy over Vita's other women, but by and large their lives are shown as not changing much. Some important things just did not get discussed in their letters to each other, not just sex, but Virginia's emotional illness, which was actually a grave, recurrent problem, ending in her suicide in 1941. In the play, the sudden drowning of this vibrant woman seems as unlikely as if she had been struck by lightning.

Furthermore, an all-letter play necessarily lacks spontaneity. However much Director Caldwell may have had the actresses prowl around each other and gaze into each other's eyes, there was no escaping that what was depicted was not two people talking but two people writing. I only wish there were a playwright today capable of putting these two wonderful characters into a full-fledged play, instead of this ersatz one. But playwrights too, it seems, have little interest in creating opportunities for aging actresses.

Donald Margulies' new play, *What's Wrong with This Picture?*, is a comedy about death. A middle-class Jewish family return to their Brooklyn apartment after the funeral of the vivacious mother, who choked to death in a Chinese restaurant on moo-shoo pork. The father is devastated; the teen-aged son indulges in endless wisecracks. The father's long-divorced sister and their mother, a classic Jewish matriarch, offer sympathy and assistance spiced with nagging; the father should sell the furniture, he should give away the dead woman's clothing, he should go to Hawaii. Margulies' previous plays have been enhanced by their literary antecedents; here, the influences are the abundant twentieth-century plays and novels dealing with Jewish family life. The sense of a female-dominated world is augmented by the matriarch's husband, an old crock who is sleepy, forgetful, and passive.

The old couple and the sister go to their respective homes, leaving father and son forlorn and alone. There is a knock at the door; in bursts the ghost of the mother, who has walked all the way home from the cemetery (she was of course buried without any money); after a welcome shower and shampoo, she is back in business, cleaning, cooking, and running the household. The rest of the play consists of the family's reactions to this strange reappearance. The father is delighted, the son wary, the sister and matriarch very disapproving. The grandfather takes the opportunity to confess his love for his daughter-in-law; years ago he danced with her at a party and held her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

close, feeling terribly guilty afterward, though she herself has forgotten the incident. It appears that there are rules for ghosts; she can eat (or at least drink; we see her with a can of Tab) but not make love, and she cannot leave the apartment. After much discussion, she decides it would be best to go back to her grave. The husband drives her back to the cemetery, and the son, alone, bursts into tears, his bantering facade at last broken.

The ability to joke about serious subjects is characteristic of Jewish humor, but here the mixture of comic and serious does not ferment. I take the play to be an extended metaphor about the inability of grieving people to let go of a beloved dead person; no doubt, the emotional source of the play is the death of Margulies' own mother. But the play, which has been rewritten often on its trek about the country, does not know whether it is a comedy or not. Most of the time it is not very funny; yet since the mother is already dead, relationships are frozen forever, so that the character choices and developments that would turn it into a serious work are impossible. Furthermore, the fact that the mother is presented as both a maternal and wifely paragon weakens the piece. Freud noted that it is harder to get over the demise of a spouse or parent when the relationship has been troubled than when it has been harmonious; the fact that the death fulfills conscious or unconscious feelings of hostility is very disturbing. If Margulies made this family more complex, the result might be a richer play, with less arbitrary turns of plot—especially the decision to return to the cemetery, which is given no real motivation.

The play, Margulies' first to make Broadway, was given a solid production at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre, where it may run well as the annual Jewish show. (Jews still make up a large proportion of the New York theatre audience.) Joe Mantello directed; Alan Rosenberg was a bit monotonous as the father, while David Moscow was fine as the jesting son until the end, when his weeping was feeble. Florence Stanley and Marcell Rosenblatt were adequate as the matriarch and sister, both stereotypical roles. Faith Prince, recently Adelaide in the Broadway production of *Guys and Dolls*, was dynamic as the ghost, but the acting honors went to Jerry Stiller as the grandfather. Stiller, identified in the program as "half of Stiller and Meara," is actually one of America's finest actors, whose abilities are perhaps overlooked because of his reputation as a comedian. His revelations here were tender, poignant, and hilarious, an amalgamation so lacking in the rest of the show.

The boy-meets-girl plot is so commonplace as to seem universal; since all human beings have a sex drive, surely sexual comedy must be found in the literatures of all people. In fact, however, the boy/girl device is entirely a product of Western culture, and can be traced back to one playwright: Menander. Much admired and much imitated in ancient times, Menander (343–291 B.C.) broke away from the satirical, political comedy of Aristophanes to focus on the courtship patterns of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the middle classes. "What normally happens," as Northrop Frye described Greek New Comedy, "is that a young man wants a young woman, that his desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will."

Last fall, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles produced Menander's *The Woman from Samos* on a bill with Plautus' *Casina*, both performed in the beautiful atrium of the museum itself. "Museum piece" is a term of scorn among American theatre people; historical plays are all supposed to be updated. Nevertheless, this production, with its splendid sense of history, was the liveliest and funniest of the whole theatrical season in L.A. The stage and setting, designed by Wesley A. McBride, used a classical facade of Ionic and Corinthian columns, and walls with painted floral and leaf motifs adapted from ancient frescoes and mosaics. Costumes, by Alex Jaeger, were all from the plays' own periods, including a chorus wearing masks, and large, visible, and in some cases erect, phalluses. This might sound like some kind of outlandish updating, but in fact phalluses were a standard joke in Greek and Roman comedy; Jaeger took his designs straight from ancient vase paintings.

The Woman from Samos was put together from fragments; not until 1969 was enough known to reconstruct it. As the translator, J. Michael Walton, noted in the program, "We now have some idea what the fuss was all about" regarding Menander, whose plays were lost from ancient times until the twentieth century. *Woman* concerns a wealthy Athenian, Demeas, with an adopted son. While Demeas is away for a long period, the son impregnates the girl next door. Ashamed, he gets his father's young wife to pass the child off as hers, which only leads to terrible misunderstandings when Demeas returns. In the end, all the confusion is sorted out, and the son marries his girlfriend, which, it turns out, was what his father had wanted all along. The characters are vivid, the moral dilemmas genuine (though small-scale), and the dialogue philosophical yet lively. A discussion between the son and father on the true nature of child legitimacy, for example, is something that audiences of all times might ponder.

Michael Hackett directed both *Woman* and *Casina* with great panache. The latter is a much weaker play than the former; not only has Plautus turned out to be a lesser playwright than Menander, the source for many of his plays (though not this one), but *Casina* is not even among Plautus' best. Nevertheless, an outstanding professional cast made up for its lapses. The same actors performed in both plays; I especially liked Jon Matthews as Demeas' son in *Woman*, angular and funny, who delivered the long speeches with clarity and vigor; and Robert Machray as the slave in both plays, a blubbery Zero Mostel type who was endlessly inventive and funny. Only the chorus wore masks in these productions, but the principals had such wonderful comic faces that they managed to outshine them, phalluses and all.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JOHN LOUGHERY

Faded Glory

A FAIR AMOUNT OF THE ART created in this last troubled decade of the twentieth century, and an even larger share of the art-exhibition process itself, seems predicated on the idea that we are living through the slow decline of painting as a vital force in modern culture. Sculpture still holds its own, but painting clearly does not. For those of us who regard a good painting with the same thrill with which we approach a satisfying novel or an ingenious film, this is a dismal state of affairs, but a crisis in confidence (as distinct from merely a fallow period, with a sense that a new generation of great painters will soon be with us) is not to be wished away. The last fin de siècle was a glorious time, with Post-Impressionism at its height and forty years of fervor and innovation still to come. Our own fin de siècle looks too uncertain in comparison with even the recent past, manufactures too many false versions of that past, or assumes that the urgent issues of our day are best addressed outside the province of canvas, pencil, paintbrush, acrylic or oil. These cheery thoughts were occasioned by a visit to several disparate autumn shows in New York: the Franz Kline exhibition and "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art," both at the Whitney Museum; a survey of modern Italian painting at the Guggenheim Museum; and a few gallery exhibitions notable for their earnestness and honesty.

The last time anyone interested in Abstract Expressionism had a chance to take the measure of Franz Kline was in 1986, when the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts presented a spectacular display of ninety-five of his paintings. That was a show that lived up to its title—"The Vital Gesture"—and left this viewer, among many, fully convinced of Kline's originality, breadth of talent, and secure place in the company of de Kooning, Pollock, Gottlieb, and Rothko. (Perhaps the word "secure" might be debated in one crucial sense: some of the better paintings are not aging well and one can only guess how many will be intact a century from now—but that is another matter, another story.) At the Whitney last fall a less ambitious but still important show focused on Kline's black-and-white paintings from the 1950s and early 1960s. On the one hand, the absence of Kline's fiery oranges and dusky purples could be taken as a loss; though he is best known for his black-and-white abstractions, this artist's sense of color was as keen and clever as that of any of his contemporaries. The blue-green underpainting in the Yale University Art Gallery's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ravenna or the patches of yellow and reddish brown in the National Gallery's *C & O* are not incidental to the majesty of those fine pictures. Yet there is a gratifying aspect to any examination of an artist that concentrates on one key dimension of his work and yet still allows him to appear as large-minded, questing, and ambitious as he really was.

In the maelstrom of *Requiem*, in the complex bridge forms of *Mahoning*, in his vaguely architectural or calligraphic effects, working sometimes with the cheapest materials (commercial paint, a house-painter's brush), Kline—like Pollock with his drips or Rothko with his blurred bars of color—wanted to see how far he could go and still have before him what amounted to "a painting." He wasn't interested in destroying or abandoning traditional painting as much as he was in enlarging upon it, creating fields, layers, and tensions of animated color that might have the same impact that clashing or interreacting objects, faces, and bodies had once brought to the art form. What we were able to see in an examination of the black-and-white pictures alone was how important a part calculation played, along with intuition, in deciding when that goal had been reached. Because, emphatically, these are not paintings of black slashes posed over a field of white, but paintings in which the white asserts itself as an equally potent element. The black beams of *Monitor* and *Painting No. 2* and the murky white of *Painting No. 11* make for a drama of collision that is the best kind of calculated spontaneity, giving the lie to the term "Action Painting" if one takes that label merely to imply impetuous decisions and fevered motions with a brush in hand. Gaze into or at all of the overpainting, the redirections: the great paradox here is that Kline's energy comes to seem as much intellectual, brilliantly plotted, as it is physical.

Of course, energy is all too often something that dates rather quickly, and it is difficult to determine why some painters look quaint fifty years after their dynamic moment in the sun while others look even more worthy of study. But in Franz Kline's case, where the energy is allied to the most exquisite sense of craft and the most unfettered willingness to explore, the latter is surely what we feel. No one made paintings before him that looked like his, and no one made any after. Indeed, a Kline imitator would be a strange bird. Kline's path was his own (even to his influences: the late Harry Gaugh made the astute observation in his catalogue for the 1986 show that, of all the major artists of the New York School, Kline was the only one whose work was imaginable without the precedent of Surrealism), and he *believed* in the expressive emotional power of his art form. It is, sadly, just that faith that is lacking today, and it is hard not to make the comparison even as we appreciate the paintings in and of themselves.

On the floor above "Franz Kline: Black and White" was another exhibition that dealt with divisions based on color, a show that attracted a different kind of attention entirely. "Black Male: Repre-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sentations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art" is a perfectly suitable theme for a museum show, let that be said right at the start. Telling museum curators what subjects they can and can't explore is no different from telling novelists what they may or may not write about. How intelligently or creatively the theme is dealt with, how attentive the curator is to the fact that his or her obligation is both to aesthetics and social content—these are the issues that matter. No novelist is going to be accepted as a greater writer because he has a strong idea and valuable things to say. What matters first and foremost is how skillfully he uses words.

In those terms, "Black Male" is a mixed bag. We entered the gallery that housed the exhibition to confront a clever and pertinent enough image—Fred Wilson's *Guarded View*, in which four headless mannequins are clothed in the slightly different guard uniforms of the city's four principal museums (the Modern, the Met, the Whitney, and the Jewish Museum). So we were hit with a fair irony at the outset: after all, who in America spends more time in the presence of art than museum guards, most of whom are black and no doubt at the bottom of the pay scale? The trouble was that a little too much of what followed was in that vein of sarcasm, minus Wilson's punch, and appeared more determined on making a statement than in arresting us visually and intellectually. Surely Jeff Koons's framed NIKE poster of a black Moses leading his people to the Promised Land with the manna of basketballs or Tim Rollins and K.O.S.'s pages of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* with the letters "M" and "X" drawn across them could have been omitted—contrary to the catalogue note, when Rollins and his "kids of survival" paint letters on a book, they are not "engaging in a complex dialogue with key issues addressed in the text." No, they are boring the pants off those of us who care about modern art and the topic of black masculinity in our society. Likewise, it is time to retire the witless Nayland Blake and his obsession with bunny rabbits, dark-skinned or otherwise.

Still, it was hard to remain cranky when in the presence of Alison Saar's *Terra Firma* sculpture of a recumbent black man; of Barkley Hendricks' majestic portraits from the 1970s (what an anomaly he is in the current scene!); of Robert Colescott's sassy *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware*; of the sleek gender-defying nude photographs of Lyle Ashton Harris, both masculine and feminine by degrees; and even of Carl Pope's massive tableau of trophies and plaques, documenting the killing of black men by white cops and the corruption of a system that would honor Michael Dowd, that pig at the trough, as "Officer of the Year." (A facsimile of his plaque is on display too.) Leon Golub, as usual, has nothing much to say, but some effort had to be made to bring more painting into the exhibition, and *Three Seated Black Men* is capably made and filled the bill. An amazingly extensive film and video program was also a central part of "Black Male," featuring old black-and-white clips from the 1920s, oddball

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

seventies fare like *Norman . . . Is That You?*, interviews with black writers, and movies by Melvin Van Peebles, Spike Lee, and the late Marlon Riggs.

In truth, "Black Male" would have worked more effectively for me if it had been unafraid to be a little less trendy and more willing to look further back in American art, to depictions of black men by black painters from a generation or two earlier. Beginning the show with some of the better paintings of Archibald Motley (see *The Hudson Review*, Volume XLVII, Number 3, Autumn 1994, pp. 457–458), William H. Johnson, and Romare Bearden, and then slowly progressing to the savage sarcasm of Robert Colescott and the unnerving photographs of Lyle Ashton Harris or Robert Mapplethorpe would have meant a larger show—as this should have been, given its potential importance—but one that would also have done right by American art, by the considerable African-American accomplishment in that area, by the full range of black self-imagery in the twentieth century, and even by the anger and dismay that properly characterize so much of the contemporary work. From Motley and Johnson to Renee Cox's crucified, castrated black man and Robert Arneson's glowering Willie Horton as George Bush's "Special Assistant," we would have come to feel the frustration and rage of the African-American condition *by degrees* (from the hopefulness of the Harlem Renaissance to the betrayal of so many promises is the real story, with a legitimately distressing impact on those of us who don't share Newt Gingrich's idea of America). As it is, we were given a visual account of the subject that was both interesting and glib, and nowhere near as lively, sad, and terrible as it should have been. There was plenty of the here-and-now in "Black Male," but not enough sense of the history of black life or the history of painting.

"The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943–1968," on the other hand, was as flat-out depressing an exhibition as any I've seen in a while. The Guggenheim's survey of Italian creativity from the fall of Fascism through the triumph of sixties consumerism aimed to be broad and celebratory. The curators saw this as a fertile period of renewal in Italy (which it certainly was economically if not aesthetically) and so assembled a display of daunting size on the order of the museum's 1992 "The Great Utopia" survey of Russian Modernism with its equivalent attention to design and architecture as well as painting and sculpture. The problem is that the two eras are light-years apart. Italy between 1943 and 1968 didn't give rise to a Malevich, a Popova, a Tatlin, and a radical rethinking of painting, typography, stagecraft, and aesthetic philosophy. It gave us the Vespa, the Olivetti, Jannis Kounellis, and Arte Povera. The dominant feeling after two visits to the show, sluggishly proceeding up and down Mr. Wright's ramp and in and out of the claustrophobic new galleries, was one of sour defeat. It isn't revitalization we witnessed in "The Italian Metamorphosis"—it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was, rather, an early acknowledgement that painting has run aground in the postwar world.

An exhibition this large couldn't be without a few high points, and the cleverness of Domenico Gnoli's sand paintings or the skill with which Ettore Colla fashions his iron assemblages are worth anyone's time. Not surprisingly, Alberto Burri's rugged, stitched burlap canvases, prophetic of the 1980s concern with "constructed painting," look as handsome as ever. But none of this is news. The unpleasant discovery at the Guggenheim was how vast a wasteland the rest of Italy's visual-arts scene comprised, from the dreary earnestness of Renato Guttuso's 1941 *Crocifissione* (intended as the representational masterwork the show opens with) to the kitsch of Enrico Castellani and the mannered tedium of Lucio Fontana, poking holes in his canvases in a desperate effort to do something, anything, to seem original at a time when it felt as if all that could be achieved in the art form had already been done. If Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art produced some first-rate artists and a horde of lightweight imitators in America, how incomparably pallid both endeavors appear in a European context. The inevitable response to the room of huge film posters, then, was to reaffirm the sense that Italy's real contribution since Mussolini's time has next to nothing to do with oil and canvas (or in Fontana's case, scissors or knife and canvas) and everything to do with the camera. Fellini, De Sica, Visconti, Pasolini, Antonioni—these are the creative names that mean something to people today, like it or not, and that reality calls into question the whole shaky premise of "The Italian Metamorphosis." Very few paintings in this show would attract an audience that was offered the chance to see *The White Sheik*, *I Vitelloni*, or *The Bicycle Thief* instead. A more succinct statement of the problem, if one chooses to see it as one, would be hard to come by.

According to one version of the story, the deification of pop culture that began in America in the 1960s and the infatuation with critical theory that began in the 1970s contributed to the decline of painting twenty years ago, a decline that was arrested in the 1980s when painters again found themselves at the center of things, with well-heeled buyers in line and the art magazines breathlessly ready to prime the pump. Today that resurgence has a bogus feel. Did it lead to anything lasting? What we see in the galleries in New York of late is an enormous amount of timid or tentative work. The air has gone out of the balloon and the painters know it better than anyone. (And, of course, if that situation is ever to change, it will have to be the recharged painters themselves who lead the way, not those of us who are merely the devoted followers and desperate consumers.) There are no Franz Klines testing the limits in our midst these days—not on canvas with brush in hand, anyway—and we are apt to hear less and less in the future about ego-mad eighties art-stars like Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and Robert Longo. So we can make the rounds and enjoy the well-made floral paintings of Morris Graves at the Schmidt-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bingham Gallery (an aspect of this artist's work entirely unknown to me before this fall) or the tight, tiny primitive dreamscapes of Raffaele at the Paolo Baldacci Gallery or M-13's survey of abstract landscapes in SoHo, all of which presented at least two or three paintings of one or another unusual quality. But how ambitious, confident, and dynamic are we to expect our painters to be in a society and a time when their necessity to the culture is open to question? Theater in America has already passed this point: for every Tony Kushner, there are a thousand would-be dramatists watching the fantasy of eager audiences and major productions receding by the minute, would-be dramatists who are well advised to abandon hope and go the screenplay route.

The pastels of G. Daniel Massad, shown at the Tatistcheff Gallery on West 57th Street in December, struck me as perfectly emblematic of this predicament, or frame of mind. Massad is an incredibly talented man. His pastels on paper are wondrously made. A few objects—darkening fruit, minuscule berries, dry sticks, chips of stone, an empty glass jar, shards of pottery—occupy the center or lower rim of the paper, usually settled on what looks to be a cracking stone ledge or remnant of a wall. A cool white light illuminates the still-life potpourri, while the better part of the picture (sometimes three-quarters of it) is the purest, emptiest, most arrogant black. There are shadows aplenty here, but no sweat, no breath, no intrusive nature, no complicated human presence. It would be hard to exaggerate the precision with which these fragments of stone and fruit are rendered (the man is a wizard with pencil and chalk), or to exaggerate the single-minded integrity of a style that has elected to banish all hints of traditional pastel brightness or richness. This is still-life after the fall, a little proud and a little eerie. You fear there's nothing left to say; Massad seems to agree, then returns to using his incomparable talent to dramatize that truth. On successive trips to the Tatistcheff Gallery in December, I found myself reacting to these fourteen pictures in radically different ways. They felt bold and authentic, then arid and fastidious, then challenging and finally indifferent to my response. For their sheer paradoxical nerve, Massad lodged himself in some secure place in my heart. The sumptuous frames—thick carved wood befitting an Eakins or a Homer—didn't hurt, either. Chutzpah on the edge of a precipice is always an appealing quality.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BERT CARDULLO

Schindler's Miss

I AM NOT ONE OF THOSE who believe that the enormity of the Holocaust is above and beyond presentation in artistic form, except in the most indirect or metaphorical way. I have never believed this, and believe that those who do wish simultaneously to apotheosize the victimhood of the Jews (but what about the victims of the Holocaust who were not Jewish?) and to deny the transformative, edifying powers of art. After all, if Christ's crucifixion can be depicted on film, the most public and graphic of art forms, so too can the Jews'. The ultimate question in art, of course, is not *what* you present but *how* you present it.

Some have chosen to treat the Holocaust in documentary film form, such as Alain Resnais with *Night and Fog* (1955), out of the apparent belief that no one could quarrel with the unvarnished truth. But Claude Lanzmann implicitly quarrels with Resnais in *Shoah* (1985), his 9½-hour documentary on the Nazi extermination of European Jewry, by not including any imagery of its central subject. We see interviews with survivors, with "former" Nazis, with Holocaust historians; we see the sites of the concentration camps today. We do not, however, see footage of the Jewish ghettoes, of the emaciated camp survivors, of the piles of corpses, as we do in *Night and Fog* and numerous other films about the German atrocities. Which is one way of saying that these atrocities are beyond representation, even in documentary form, and that to represent them is somehow to endorse them; that, before as well as after the Nazis, such brutality was and is unimaginable or, conversely, possible only in the imagination.

Other directors have elected to treat the Holocaust in fictional form (if that is the appropriate term), going as far back as Wanda Jakubowska's *The Last Stage* (1948) and Aleksander Ford's *Border Street* (1949), continuing with Andrzej Munk's *The Passenger* (1963), and stretching into the present with Andrzej Wajda's *Korczak* (1990). Each of these films, with the possible exception of the documentary-like *Last Stage*, is marred by broad or monochromatic characterizations and rhetorical gestures; each was also made in Poland, where today only a few thousand Jews are left out of the more than three million who lived there before Hitler's arrival in 1939. To this list of films we must now add Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, trumpeted as "the first Hollywood movie to depict the horrors of the Holocaust" (not true), and made by the most commercially successful director in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

history of cinema. So much so that his previous picture, *Jurassic Park* (1993), is already approaching $900 million in earnings worldwide.

Commercially successful *Schindler's List* will be, too, for it is not the start of a new, "adult" period in Spielberg's career, as a number of critics have argued—they made the same specious argument after the sanctimonious *Color Purple* (1985)—but rather a redeployment in ostensibly serious form of his crackerjack formula for entertaining the masses. That formula is at work in such superficially different yet essentially similar movies as *Jaws* (1975), a horror film, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), an adventure flick harking back to the Saturday-morning serials of the fifties, and *E.T.* (1982), a science-fiction fairy tale: an Everyman protagonist has his conception of the world dramatically enlarged as he comes face to face with some extraordinary, generally nonhuman antagonist often hidden from the rest of the world, and the audience, until the film's end. Spielberg's vision is that of the child-artist whose innocent imagination can, on command, summon up primeval dread from the deep as well as transcendent wonder from the sky, and *Schindler's List* proves no exception. Indeed, it exemplifies that vision, which twice before has used World War II as a backdrop: in the crazy (stupid?) comedy *1941* (1979); and in *Empire of the Sun* (1987), *Schindler's List*'s nearest relative in the Spielberg canon, in which an eleven-year-old English boy gets his sentimental education amidst the random brutality of a Japanese internment camp.

Spielberg's latest film is based on the "documentary novel" of the same name published in 1982 by the Australian writer Thomas Keneally, which is to say it tells a true story that is somewhat touched up. The hero of the tale is Oskar Schindler, a Catholic businessman from the German Sudetenland who, when Hitler conquered Poland, moved to Kraków to strike it rich. He opportunistically joined the Nazi Party, spent what money he had on treating German officers to food, drink, and women, then was permitted to take over an enamelware factory confiscated from its Jewish owners. Staffing the factory with unpaid Jewish workers, Schindler quickly achieved huge profits by manufacturing metal pots and pans for the German troops. His chief assistant in this enterprise was a Jewish accountant named Itzhak Stern, who discreetly turned "Emalia," as the factory became known, into a haven for Jewish refugees, kept track of which official needed bribing in what way, and generally managed his boss's business affairs. His domestic affairs Schindler could manage for himself: in short, by leaving his wife, Emilie, behind in the Sudetenland, becoming intimate with a number of young Polish women, and living the life of a bon vivant.

Then in the winter of 1942 his antagonist or alter ego arrived in the person of SS Commander Amon Goeth, whose mission was to set up the nearby Plaszów forced labor camp and liquidate the Jewish ghetto in Kraków's Podgorze district. Horrified by the murderous treatment

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the Jews as well as by the disappearance of his labor force, Schindler cultivated a friendship with the bestial yet suave Goeth, persuading him by means of gifts and geld to authorize the building of a sub-camp at "Emalia" so that his workers could resume production. By 1944, when orders came for the removal of all Plaszów Jews to Auschwitz, Schindler decided it was time to leave Kraków for his hometown of Brünnlitz on the Czechoslovakian border. Here, reunited with his wife and assisted by the trusty Stern, he opened a munitions factory staffed with 1,100 "essential" Jewish workers, whose lives he had purchased from Goeth at great cost and risk; and here he ensured, again at great cost and risk, that for seven months his work force would produce nothing of military value to the German army. At the end of those seven months Oskar Schindler was broke but the war had ended, his Jews had survived, and the Nazi Goeth had been executed. Leaving his employees to their newfound freedom, he fled to the West and died in 1974, a complete failure at every business he tried after the war. But 6,000 "Schindler Jews" remain today after him, survivors from his list of "essential workers" together with their descendants.

What's wrong with this picture, or what makes *Schindler's List* in the end an artless film? First, after *Shoah*, there wasn't any need for another movie about the Holocaust, at least not yet, and certainly not for the millions of dollars this one cost; put another way, if you're going to make such a movie, you had better have some light to shed on the subject, something to add to all that has already been said, thought, written, felt, filmed. Spielberg has nothing. He's a popular artisan, not a serious artist, which means that he's interested not in expanding viewers' minds, in challenging their views or unsettling their emotions, but in reinforcing their received ideas of history and the world, in reconfirming their prejudices. All that *Schindler's List* does is congratulate its audience for not being anti-Semitic, for deploring the evil of the Nazis—an evil that they in their virtue would never be capable of, of course. In its mission to sanctify the Jews and the "good German" who helped them, at the same time that it puts money in its director's purse, Spielberg's film is similar to two other recent, high-profile releases from Follywood: *Malcolm X*, a bit of hagiography for all those who deplore racism, and *Philadelphia*, a charmer directed at that segment of the American population which thinks it has never had a homophobic thought.

Schindler's List, then, is a sentimental melodrama, nothing more, and as such takes its ignoble place alongside all the other anti-German, pro-Ally (or -Occupee) propaganda films made during the Second World War and long after it. It is technically well made and acted, yes, but that's like saying a book has been beautifully printed and handsomely bound, then concluding that its content must therefore be of equally high quality. The content of *Schindler's List* is *clichéd*, that's what it is, beginning with screenwriter Steven Zaillian's decision

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to focus primarily on Oskar Schindler's story, on the metamorphosis of his character from self-regarding opportunist to self-disregarding savior, and juxtapose it to the static malevolence of Amon Goeth. What we get as a result is the Hollywood practice of showing catastrophe, or deliverance therefrom, from the point of view of the perpetrators; what we lose in the process is the Jewish perspective on events, the genocide of the Jews as seen through *their* eyes.

Lina Wertmüller tried something like this in her tragic farce *Seven Beauties* (1975), where she followed the "adventures" of an Italian deserter in a German prison that reeks of murder. Wertmüller failed, but Spielberg doesn't even try, except to single out the angelic Itzhak Stern from the anonymous mass of Jews as the apparent agent of *Schindler's* moral awakening. I say "apparent" because, although Stern seems to have something to do with it, Schindler's change is not clearly articulated in either the book or the film. Keneally says that nobody knows exactly why Schindler did his good deed, and Spielberg more or less takes him at his word. Some have seen this absence of explanation as the film's virtue, arguing that *Schindler's List* is in fact about the mystery of the titular character's goodness, which finally is as inexplicable as the mystery of Nazi savagery. But this is to give far too much credit to the movie, which is really about Schindler's goodness, wherever it comes from, in a battle against diabolical evil in the form of Goeth.

So much is the film a stereotypical allegory or anachronistic morality play on the division of the German soul between the absolute good of Schindler and the absolute evil of Goeth, as opposed to a character study of the dialectical, inner struggle between these two contradictory impulses in one human being, that it resorts to the moral conventions of Hollywood films of a bygone era in order to divide the world into black and white. Hence Nazi criminality, including Schindler's, is regularly associated with promiscuous sexuality and revelrous gluttony, while Jewish innocence—especially the ascetic Stern's—is directly connected to ethical purity and lethal starvation. For example, at one point Spielberg heavily intercuts among scenes of Goeth's near-rape, then vicious beating of his young Jewish housekeeper, Helen Hirsch; a Jewish marriage ceremony, performed by a woman, in one of the camp huts; and a nightclub party at which a chanteuse simultaneously serenades and seduces Schindler. Shortly thereafter, we watch Goeth's doctor warn him against his overindulgent life-style during a physical examination, then watch camp doctors examine Jews to decide which ones are healthy enough to remain slave laborers and which are so sick or undernourished that they must be exterminated. These are not isolated instances, but rather regular manifestations of an editorial mode that Spielberg establishes early on in the film, when the sybaritic Schindler moves into a luxury apartment in Kraków with the words "It couldn't be better" while the married Jewish owners of that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

apartment resettle in a crowded ghetto rattrap with the words "It could be worse."

Even Schindler's transformation from cynical war profiteer into empathetic human rescuer is portrayed in terms of his sensuality, or rather his renunciation of it. Once he enigmatically makes the decision to save the lives of the Jews working for him—while he paces the floor to the tune of Billie Holliday's "God Bless the Child" playing on his phonograph!—Schindler stops the rampant womanizing and extravagant living that had marked his earlier existence and rejoins his wife. The fact that they agree to get back together in a Catholic church is Spielberg's ponderous way of telling us that theirs will now be an essentially spiritual union. But not as ponderous as his and Zaillian's decision to have Schindler forswear his adulteries in the first place—just as he forswears them in Keneally's novel but not according to the real-life Emilie Schindler's best recollection. The reborn Schindler complements his winning over of his wife by winning Helen Hirsch in a card game with the devil himself, Goeth; that is, he wins her life, her soul, for transport to Brünnlitz whereas, like the SS commander, he had previously desired only her body. Then he miraculously rescues a trainload of his women workers (297 of them, to be exact, as opposed to 801 men), including Hirsch, mistakenly routed to Auschwitz, even as he had earlier saved his accountant, Stern, from a similar fate. And once ensconced in his new factory, Schindler is virtually deified by Spielberg in a low-angle shot as he sermonizes to the awestruck Jews down on the workroom floor.

What about how *Schindler's List* looks, in contrast to how it tells its story? The film looks great, as I've hinted, and that's part of the problem. Except for an epilogue and a few other moments (more on these exceptions later), *Schindler's List* has been shot in black and white by Janusz Kaminski. Spielberg has argued that since our knowledge of concentration camps comes from black-and-white photographs and newsreels, a film about the Holocaust should have a documentary look as well. Fine. The problem, however, is not that Kaminski's superbly shaded cinematography is too beautiful, too "artistic," too undocumentary-like, as several commentators have maintained, but that it stands in aesthetic contradiction to the narrative line of the film, the story of its characters. There isn't a Manichaean division between angelic white and infernal black in the images, but rather a relativistic gradation from black to gray to white that is sometimes augmented by mist or dust, and regularly underlined by a handheld camera that destabilizes the frame. There *is* such a Manichaean division between the characters in *Schindler's List*, whose Jews are decent, noble, generous, saintly, and wise, and whose Germans are naturally just the opposite, with Oskar Schindler in the middle ready to exchange one extreme for the other, or suddenly to discover the inherent goodness in himself that has been obscured by his thoughtless actions. One therefore feels a kind of cognitive dissonance while watching the film,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and that dissonance is not relieved by the screenplay's halfhearted attempts to "complicate" its antagonists.

To wit, the German officer who sits down to play the piano in a room "cleansed" of its Jews during the obliteration of the Kraków ghetto, and the two soldiers who argue over whether his music is by Bach or Mozart, are clumsily meant to tell us that even Nazis can have an appreciation for classical music, which is to say a human face beneath their monstrous mask. And the Jews who, after a good deal of hard bargaining, agree to finance Schindler's kitchenware factory are cursorily meant to tell us that there were black marketeers and collaborators even among the sacrosanct *Juden*. But these Jews, like those Nazis, should have been the subject of—not a footnote in—any latter-day Holocaust film, in order to reveal the Nazi and the Jew, the moneychanger and the art-lover, the wolf and the sheep in all of us. Obviously, this is not to deny the historical fact of the Holocaust or to make a case for National Socialism; it is to insist that, even among the victims of German butchery, there were sinners as well as saints, bad people along with the good, other people besides Jews (including 300,000 homosexuals together with the inmates of Germany's prisons and mental hospitals). I want to know about them in all their human complexity, not just their innocent victimization, and I want to see genuinely humanized German soldiers, not smoothly or even banally wicked Nazi oppressors, committing acts of violence—toward Jew and Gentile alike—against their will or to avoid their own execution.

What I do not want to see, after a three-hour sermon accompanied by the woebegone violin of Itzhak Perlman and culminating in Schindler's anguished cry that he could have saved more Jews had he not been such a spendthrift, is an epilogue shot in constrained color in present-day Israel. Here Oskar Schindler was buried at his request, just shy of his seventieth year, and at his graveside on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, a number of actors from the film are partnered with the aged survivors they have been impersonating—just in case we still doubted the "truth" of their story—together paying silent homage to the man who rescued 1,100 Jews from Hitler's ovens.[1] I nearly groaned at the unabashed bathos and forced obeisance of this sequence, which is connected to a prologue to *Schindler's List* where, in color, candles are lighted during a Jewish religious ritual only to have their flames successively die out (symbolism, anyone?), which is itself connected to a scene from the annihilation of Podgorze. As Schindler observes the destruction of this ghetto from a hillside above the city,

[1] You can find a similarly truth-certifying epilogue in Agnieszka Holland's mawkish *Europa, Europa* (1991), about a young Polish Jew who managed to survive the Nazi terror by masquerading as an Aryan. A frequent collaborator on Andrzej Wajda's films, Holland wrote the banal, plodding screenplay of his *Korczak*, which is about the storied Polish-Jewish physician who perished at Treblinka along with the children of the orphanage he directed.

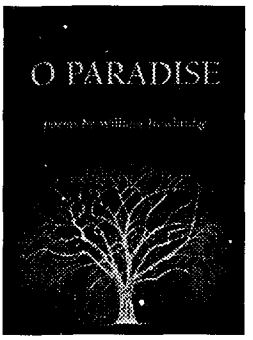
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the camera—*the camera*, which assumes his point of view, not Schindler's naked eye, which is too far away—picks out the red overcoat of a little girl wandering in black and white among the carnage-cum-wreckage. Later the child's body, still clad in the red that makes her stand out among other corpses, turns up on a cart that passes underneath Schindler's gaze. Spielberg is straining in this instance to plant the seed of his hero's epiphany, his metamorphosis into a moral man, but he does so at the expense of all the other victims we, and Schindler, have seen. Or is the Spielbergian child-artist up to his old tricks here, fatuously arguing that unspeakable crimes become expressible or comprehensible only when they are being perpetrated against children?

Fortunately—or is it unfortunately?—the three principal actors are so good that, like Janusz Kaminski's cinematography, they make *Schindler's List* seem better than it is, almost enabling the film to transcend its naïve vision of the world. How do Liam Neeson, Ben Kingsley, and Ralph Fiennes, as Schindler, Stern, and Goeth respectively, do this? Not merely by committing to the external actions of their characters—to Schindler's sensuality or Goeth's sadism or even Stern's impassivity—but also by creating inner lives for them in a form, the melodrama, that does not really call for consciousness of self. This was especially an achievement in the case of the Nazi villain, who, although here based on fact, has become such a cinematic cliché that Fiennes had to invent a fiction beneath the reality of Goeth, an imaginative truth beyond the truth of his existence, in order to make him horrifyingly believable rather than comically implausible. I don't find it accidental that none of these men is American, or that there are very few Americans in a large cast that includes Polish, German, and Israeli actors as well as amateurs. Somehow Spielberg figured out that his quintessentially American, "them-against-us" view of the world in this film needed foreign actors if it was to be taken seriously—actors, that is, who have inherited the knowledge, the grief, the gravity of a genocidal war conducted in their own backyard.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Coming in the Summer 1995 issue
of The Hudson Review: "The Country
I Remember," a Civil War narrative
by David Mason, "Costly Habits,"
a short story by Peter Makuck,
and "O, Paglia Mia!" a review
by Harold Fromm



O Paradise

Poems by William Trowbridge

As Howard Nemerov has said in praise of William Trowbridge's first poetry collection: "he is very much up on the peculiarities of our little time in the world . . . [H]e is both funny and serious, seriously funny; probably the best, if not the only, way of dealing with the complex predicament." This is fast-paced, nervy poetry whose witty, tough-guy language moves surprisingly toward transcendence.

$18.00 cloth, 1-55728-341-9
$10.00 paper, 1-55728-342-7

1-800-626-0900

ARKANSAS
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS PRESS
McIlroy House ♦ 201 Ozark Avenue ♦ Fayetteville, AR 72701

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JAMES W. TUTTLETON

Getting to Know Edith

> . . . it was John [Hugh-Smith] who could tell his friend so much about Edith that he still couldn't stop, and again no reason why he should when his tale was so interesting; and so we discussed her, admired her, criticised her, and generally and finally agreed that she was a wonder. . . . There might be little left that I didn't know about her now, but I seemed no nearer to knowing Edith.
>
> —Percy Lubbock, *Portrait of Edith Wharton*

I, FOR ONE, HAVE BEEN AWAITING with great curiosity the advertised new biographies of Edith Wharton. Much of the advance publicity, it was claimed, would revolutionize our view of the woman and writer—and alter, in fact, the portrait of her so memorably painted in R. W. B. Lewis' impressive *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (1975). The Lewis life was remarkably full, judicious, balanced, and impregnably established on a solid research base (to which Lewis had at the time exclusive access). His biography by and large confirmed what was publicly known about the novelist, but it brought to light many unknown facts about her private life and personal history. And, for the first time, it made the novelist come alive (as Lubbock's lifeless portrait had not). At the time it seemed likely that no other biography would be necessary for quite a while, especially after the Pulitzer Prize elevated the book to unassailable distinction. Furthermore, his ground-breaking edition of *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, edited with Nancy Lewis seven years ago, seemed unequivocally to establish Lewis' primacy in the field of Wharton studies. Who could challenge his splendid accomplishment?

The edition of the *Letters*, however, aroused a rather bitter controversy that promised a revolution in Wharton biography; and it is this controversy that accounts in part for my sense of expectation. In 1988, thirteen years after the publication of his life of Wharton, Lewis' Yale research assistants—Marion Mainwaring and Mary Pitlick—jointly trashed his biography in the *TLS*, claimed that it was full of errors, and decried its "distorted" image of the woman and writer. Each promised to rescue Mrs. Wharton from this "official portrait" that supposedly did not faithfully draw the lineaments of the writer. The proof that Edith needed liberating from her male biographers would be shown in Ms. Pitlick's forthcoming account of Edith's early life in New York; and Ms. Mainwaring promised to set the record straight, regarding Edith's residence abroad, in a book to be called *The Mysteries of Paris*, which would contain tantalizing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

revelations about Morton Fullerton, Mrs. Wharton's then-shadowy lover. It has now been two decades since Lewis' biography appeared and seven years since both of these women attacked Lewis in print. Since neither the Pitlick nor Mainwaring biography has yet appeared, and since there seems to be a real question as to whether either of them ever will appear, Lewis' life remains standing. It is, however, older than some of my undergraduates and, in the twenty years since it appeared, a new cache of stunning Wharton letters has surfaced. A new life is therefore called for.

Curiosity, however, may be indistinguishable from trepidation. And mine took on a grey cast at the ominous announcement that the first biography actually to reach print, since the Lewis life, would not be that of Ms. Mainwaring or Ms. Pitlick but that of Shari Benstock.[1] Why shudder at that? Well, Ms. Benstock has devoted her academic career to promoting and even directing Women's Studies programs at one college or another. Nothing wrong with that. But in the process she has made some rather bizarre claims for literature by or about women. (Ms. Benstock is the author of *Textualizing the Feminine, The Private Self, On Fashion,* and *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940.*) This last-named book, for example, has a long chapter on Mrs. Wharton which would have mortified the novelist. For there the author bizarrely grouped Edith Wharton with Solita Solano, Natalie Barney, Renée Vivien, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Adrienne Monnier, and a number of other radical women writers, all of them (as it turns out) lesbians. It was Ms. Benstock's astonishing proposition that the history of literary modernism was all wrong and had to be rewritten. It was not, after all, "The Men of 1914" (Joyce, Lewis, Pound, Eliot, etc.) who had created the Anglo-American modernist revolution but rather "The Women of the Left Bank." And their lesbianism, for Ms. Benstock, was inseparable from the experimentalist revolution that produced modernism as we know it. This is all tosh, of course, and Edith Wharton would have been appalled to find herself merged in the literary company of the merely perverse and the bohemian. (Of Ms. Benstock's writers, only Miss Stein was notable then and is still readable [selectively] today.) Not only had Mrs. Wharton little or no interest in the lesbian writers in Paris, she had nothing but contempt for literary modernism as a movement. She found in the prose of even the best modernists (Joyce, Woolf) an amorphous incoherent muddle.

In any case, one groaned in advance at what enormities might be committed in the name of Edith Wharton for the sake of contemporary radical feminism. However, it is a pleasure to report that, in *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton,* Ms. Benstock is not the woman she was. She has shed her revisionist zeal and her kinky

[1] NO GIFTS FROM CHANCE: A Biography of Edith Wharton, by *Shari Benstock.* Charles Scribner's Sons. $28.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

theories about literary history and has written here a solid, extensively researched, thoughtful and illuminating life of our best woman novelist. It is as if she has recently discovered that literature has a real relationship to life and that the hothouse atmosphere of academia and the MLA does not provide enough oxygen to sustain serious literary scholarship today. In any event, this life is substantial in length, judiciously proportioned, readable in style, and fully documented. It is wonderfully sympathetic to its subject, although Mrs. Wharton's antifeminism, anti-Semitism, and her class prejudices are discomfiting to the politically correct Ms. Benstock. This is, moreover, the first life to integrate into the portrait all of the new information that has recently come to light about Mrs. Wharton's love affair with Morton Fullerton in 1908–1909. The book corrects a number of minor errors in the Lewis life, but it does not alter our sense of the woman and writer. It does, however, reargue from the evidence two important issues (to which I shall turn in a moment).

Ms. Benstock's biography arises from a simple question about the young Edith Newbold Jones: "How did the frightened debutante become the social chronicler of her age, an internationally acclaimed author of forty-seven books, a woman of firm opinions and independent mind?" One of the pleasures of the book is that the author does not superimpose a psychological grid upon the helpless subject. She does not give us any procrustean construct of personality—Freudian, Jungian, Ericksonian, Piagetian, Lacanian—that Mrs. Wharton must fit or else be lopped off at the feet. Ms. Benstock is content to recount, rather objectively, Edith's birth in 1862 into the privileged class of well-born New Yorkers. Her parents George Frederic and Lucretia Rhinelander Jones were not the richest branch of the family, but her grandfather had co-founded (with Teddy Roosevelt's) the Chemical Bank of New York, and there seemed a great deal to go around. Aunt Mary Mason Jones (the Mrs. Manson Mingott of *The Age of Innocence*) owned a block of marble palaces on Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Seventh, where she hovered over her extensive brood. One of the Jones clan, Aunt Elizabeth Schermerhorn Jones, built so palatial an estate in Rhinecliff, on the Hudson, that people despaired of "keeping up with the Joneses." Ms. Benstock gives us a swiftly moving account of Edith's early private tutoring, her courtships and engagements, her wedding in 1885 to Edward Wharton, her first life as a young married in the Old 400 set, and her dawning career as a new novelist and short story writer. Ms. Benstock's portrait of life in Old New York is rather thin compared to the detailed picture that Mary Pitlick has promised (but not delivered). But it is suggestive enough to serve us well and is gratifyingly less gaudy than that of Martin Scorsese.

Mrs. Wharton's first American novels—*The Touchstone* (1900), *The Valley of Decision* (1902), *Sanctuary* (1903), *The House of Mirth* (1905), and *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907)—are discussed in the context of her developing talent, her intermittent ill health, and her growing discon-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tent with a merely social existence in the city. New York offered her an intellectually and aesthetically impoverished milieu, and Mrs. Wharton's reasons for expatriation to Paris in 1907 are aptly recounted. The longueurs of her marriage to the intellectual dullard Teddy, who eventually descended into madness, is movingly told, and the explosive love affair with Fullerton is of course writ large. Edith Wharton was a woman with many friends, and Ms. Benstock is generous in the fullness of her treatment of the rôle in Edith's life played by Henry James, John Hugh Smith, Sally Norton, Mary Cadwalader Jones, Percy Lubbock, Bernard and Mary Berenson, Robert Norton, Walter Berry, Daisy Chanler, and Paul Bourget. All the while that she cultivated these friendships she was of course composing those remarkable short stories and novels like *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Reef* (1912) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913).

World War I, which erupted when she was in her early fifties, broke Mrs. Wharton's life in two and destroyed, she felt, the last vestiges of her Old New York. But Ms. Benstock gives a rich account of the writer's amazing vitality and of her indefatigable war work with the refugees of the Low Countries, for which Mrs. Wharton was honored by the governments of Belgium and France. Her war fiction—*The Marne* (1918) and *A Son at the Front* (1923)—is accorded its due; and her postwar satires of Jazz Age folly—*The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), *Twilight Sleep* (1927), and *The Children* (1928)— are related to Mrs. Wharton's deepening sense of cultural loss. The war, she was later to write in her memoir *A Backward Glance* (1934), "abruptly tore down the old frame-work [of New York society], and what had seemed unalterable rules of conduct became of a sudden observances as quaintly arbitrary as the domestic rites of the Pharaohs." If there seemed to be a valedictory in Mrs. Wharton's withdrawal to her estate in the south of France after the war, she did not limit herself to gardening alone. She put her sense of loss to good purpose in the fictional recreations of the world of her youth in *The Age of Innocence* (1920), *Old New York* (1924), and *The Buccaneers*, which was posthumously published in 1938.

I have said that Ms. Benstock is innocent of a psychological theory, but her sense of Mrs. Wharton derives from this passage from the writer's commonplace book (copied from Arnold's "Resignation: To Fausta"):

> They, believe me, who await
> No gifts from chance, have conquered fate.

Ms. Benstock takes this to mean that "Edith seemed to feel the need of taking her life into her own hands and shaping it to her needs and desires." Certainly this she did. I cannot think of another American writer whose fate was so little in the hands of others or whose desire was so little constrained by the usual impedimenta of life. Very little detained her when she formed a wish.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She wrote every morning of her mature life, producing a series of genuine masterworks, and spent every afternoon and evening in devouring the world. Made even richer by her literary successes, she came and went as she pleased—to England, France, Spain, Italy, America, wherever her whims took her. On the basis of aesthetic pleasure, privacy, and creature comfort, she transformed the landscapes, the houses, and the gardens of every place she lived in. The perfect interiors and many of the exteriors she decorated herself or supervised. No detail of her physical space escaped meticulous attention. The social space she filled with brilliant and accomplished artists and writers (and bent them to her will with unexpected and remarkable results). Her lifelong friend Paul Bourget was only one of many both dazzled and intimidated by this remarkable person, whom he captured as a young woman in *Outre-Mer*:

> Though like all the others [this American girl] gets her gowns from the best houses of the Rue da la Paix, there is not a book of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Renan, Taine, which she has not studied, nor a painter or sculptor of whose works she could not compile a catalogue, not a school of poetry or romance of which she does not know the principles. She subscribes impartially to the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and the gazettes of the latest coteries of the Latin Quarter or Montmartre. Only she does not distinguish between them. She has not an idea that is not exact, and yet she gives you the strange impression as if she had none. One would say that she had ordered her intellect somewhere, as we would order a piece of furniture, to measure, and with as many compartments as there are branches of human knowledge. She acquires them only that she may put them into these drawers.... Before the intellectual girl one longs to cry:—"Oh, for one ignorance, one error, just a single one. May she make a blunder, may she prove not to know!" In vain. A mind may be mistaken, a mind may be ignorant, but never a thinking machine!

Was Ms. Wharton a thinking machine? She liked to think of herself as the high priestess of reason, and it cannot be doubted that her writing is infused with a dry rationalism derivative of her independent reading in philosophy and Victorian scientific materialism. But Henry James conjured up another machine, calling her the "pendulum woman," because she was constantly on the go. Ms. Benstock finds Edith Wharton's more or less continuous mind-boggling tourism—in carriages, landaus, traps, in gigs, on trains, and (later) in her own Panhards and Peugeots—evidence of her curiosity and interest in places and peoples. But there is something more manic to it than that. She not only wanted to be in continual motion; she demanded sparkling companionship while in transit. Henry James always dissolved into mock terror at the approach of one of her frequent visits, warning his correspondents that the Devastatrix, the Eagle on irides-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cent wings who "rode the whirlwind" and "played with the storm" was descending on him, poor croaking barnyard fowl that he was, to snatch him off, on "India rubber wings," to Provence, the Pyrenees, or Poitiers. Bernard Berenson complained that he couldn't get any work done when such a demanding tour director descended on the Villa I Tatti. How was he to get in his naps? "I've made up my mind, for the next few years, to eat the world leaf by leaf," she told B.B., "and I have projets de voyage to unfold that will, I hope, make you follow me as if I were the Pied Piper." She was impatient and imperious if the rats didn't follow, but she took off without them. So much of her correspondence is a mind-numbing itinerary of this constant motion to villages, churches, spas, museums, galleries and the like that Ms. Benstock loses, from time to time, a sense of *la vie intérieur* of her subject. Edith lived, James sighed, a "whirligig life."

I raise these points in an effort to get at the two new elements in the Benstock biography, which is otherwise not markedly different from the Lewis life. Ms. Benstock wishes to revise the common understanding of Mrs. Wharton's mental health in the 1890s. R. W. B. Lewis suggested that in 1895–1896 Edith suffered a "total nervous collapse that endured . . . for more than two years." He accepted the received tradition that had her traveling to Philadelphia for treatment by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, an expert on the nervous diseases of women. And Lewis cited the letters that she wrote to her friends and to her publisher describing her condition and explaining the delays in the production of her work. But Ms. Benstock wants us to believe that Mrs. Wharton's maladies were manifestations of "organic dysfunction": "Stress and overwork increased her vulnerability to sinus irritation, throat infections, flu, bronchitis, asthma, and lung congestion. . . ."

Certainly people do suffer from these ailments, but Ms. Benstock is determined to diagnose Edith as always emotionally okay. Confronting the contradictory evidence of the letters, however, she must read Mrs. Wharton as a dealer in "subterfuges" who merely intended to "dramatize her situation to editors who were far away and could not verify the state of her physical health." Is it an improvement to save the writer's mental health by making her out to be a liar? Edith unmistakably went to Philadelphia for therapy in 1898, but Ms. Benstock is very uncomfortable with the idea of psychiatric treatment, insists on hay fever or the flu, and remarks rather lamely that "it was rumored that she had suffered a nervous breakdown, an inaccurate explanation she let stand." If it were inaccurate, why would she have let her friends think such a thing? This makes no sense. Anna Bahlmann, the governess who stayed on with Pussy Jones after her marriage to Teddy, was more to the point in one of her letters: "Mrs. Wharton is terribly driven this week." Not just that week but very nearly every week until well into her sixties, when Mrs. Wharton became more settled and attained at last a sense of repose and peace of mind.

On one other matter, Shari Benstock offers a revisionist reading of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Edith Wharton's life. The bombshell publication in 1985 of a cache of unknown letters from Edith to her lover Morton Fullerton had the initial effect of elating feminist readers of Wharton. Far from being a thinking machine, they showed her as a woman of passion and feeling, as entranced in the grand passion of love, and as "transcending" the petty impediment of her marriage vows to Teddy Wharton. Far from a stiff, sexless Victorian *grande dame*, here was a woman capable of intense erotic feeling whose rejection of the marital mores of her time made her fit company for modern skeptics about marriage. This much is incorporated into the Benstock biography, which argues (unconvincingly) that the affair was not consummated until 1909.

But there is after all more to the adulterous affair than Ms. Benstock gives us. Mrs. Wharton's letters to Fullerton and her diaries show her wishing to merge or even *submerge* her personality, her mind, her very identity in his—a thing no dedicated feminist could conceivably countenance. Moreover, as the affair evaporated, Mrs. Wharton was reduced to rather abject pleading for Fullerton's attention. His intermittent visits and his lengthening silences were bewildering to her, and she was as distraught as any abandoned maid crying after her lover. These letters are, to me, remarkable for their intense longing, for the depth of their despair, their poignance, and their self-abasement, a fact made even more irritating in view of Fullerton's compulsive sexual promiscuity with other women (as well as men). Many have asked: How could this self-reliant woman have capitulated so abjectly—and to such a cad? The letters are evidently such an embarrassment to Ms. Benstock that she ignores almost all of them in order to preserve inviolate the image of Edith as a strong and independent heroine. Also unmentioned by Ms. Benstock is Edith's later expostulation to Charles Du Bos: "Ah, the poverty, the miserable poverty, of any love that lies outside of marriage, of any love that is not a living together, a sharing of all!" In my view these omissions needlessly falsify the woman's personality and her values out of a sense, no doubt, that so powerful a woman and so accomplished a writer should never appear "weak." But much of the plain human appeal of Edith Wharton is lost, it seems to me, by this tactic.

Something of the same dilemma—over whether Edith Wharton is sufficiently "liberated"—infects another recent biography of Wharton: Susan Goodman's *Edith Wharton's Inner Circle*, a composite life of the writer and her closest friends.[2] Ms. Goodman knows that there is a great deal of evidence in the novels that Mrs. Wharton's heroines are oppressed by the patriarchy or fetishized as commodities. Certainly *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* deplore the extent to which women in New York high society were "shielded from life." Wasn't Edith a true feminist? Ms. Goodman recounts an anxiety

[2] EDITH WHARTON'S INNER CIRCLE, by *Susan Goodman*. University of Texas Press. $24.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dream about the writing of her biography in which Mrs. Wharton "invited me for a motor-flight, after which I elatedly skipped down a hill, secure in the knowledge that she trusted me." But the question is whether Ms. Goodman trusts Edith Wharton: "Since then," Ms. Goodman complains, "I have read a letter she wrote to her sister-in-law which stated that women scholars would be better off staying home and having babies."

It is true that Mrs. Wharton told Minnie Jones that she was "not much interested in [donating to] travelling scholarships for women or in fact in scholarship, tout court!—they'd much better stay at home and mind the baby." Ms. Benstock complains that Edith "was even less interested in helping 'female Yids,' and young ladies who address a stranger as 'Chère Madame' and sign 'meilleurs sentiments' (modes of address that suggest familiarity)." There is no doubt that Edith held the common prejudices of her class, even while cultivating her friendships with Jews like Berenson and assisting young professional women like her niece Beatrix Jones Farrand. We must add to this the dismay Ms. Benstock feels because Edith Wharton was critical of lesbianism as a form of "degeneracy" (there goes revisionary modernism!) and because she voiced a "patriotism" for America during World War I which Ms. Benstock finds "embarrassing."

Can a writer who was so politically incorrect, at least on these points, be worthwhile today? These are questions for the political activist or mere militant and do not bear upon the important issues of literary art. We will have to take Edith warts and all. But anyone who loves literature itself can easily dispose of such questions by turning to Eleanor Dwight's remarkable new pictorial biography, *Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life*.[3] There Ms. Dwight, with a wonderful economy of means (and 335 stunning photographs), gives a wonderfully rounded and discriminating narrative of Mrs. Wharton's life that is properly founded on what really draws us to her—the extraordinary aesthetic intelligence, the striking literary accomplishment, of the woman and the writer. Ms. Dwight concludes her book by quoting Berenson on Edith in a letter to Louis Gillet: "For me she can never be dead. She will remain while consciousness lasts in me, a projected emotion & ideal a cultural term of reference. How can it be otherwise, after thirty years of such spiritual intimacy and of such fraternal affection. She is only out of reach whence answers may not be expected. That is bad enough but it is not death."

[3] EDITH WHARTON: An Extraordinary Life, by *Eleanor Dwight*. Harry N. Abrams. $39.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Appreciating Kingsley Amis

EVEN AS, A FEW YEARS AGO, HE BECAME Sir Kingsley and settled into the process of surviving his seventies (he is now seventy-three), Kingsley Amis was largely regarded in this country as a relic, an antic reactionary whose work could be taken seriously only by illiberal males predisposed to chauvinism. His detractors might grant that, yes, his first novel, *Lucky Jim*, was highly entertaining and that there were things to praise in some of the work to follow in the 1950s and 1960s. But his alleged misogyny, increasingly retrograde views on education, race, and the Russian Threat—even on alcohol, whose praise he continued to sing as enlightened times frowned—all together conspired to leave him out there alone on his limb. In *Jake's Thing* and *Stanley and the Woman* especially, he was accused of purveying jaundiced attitudes towards human beings that excoriated many of the men but almost all of the women: the all-purpose comedian had become a sharp-fanged, cruelly unfair satirist. Anyway why should Americans take him to their hearts when, in *Difficulties With Girls*, the only thing adulterous Patrick Standish can say to his latest conquest after she has post-coitally observed "The sky is blue, and I feel gay," is "Are you an American?" Currently the other Amis has more of his fiction in print here than does dad, and perhaps this is a payback for dad's inability, so he claims, to read son Martin's works with pleasure. The point is that most American novel readers gave up on Kingsley Amis awhile back.

Thus has injustice been done to this increasingly impressive writer whose forty years' worth of fiction shows no signs of drying up. For Amis is no less than what one of his critics called "a serious comic novelist": and if the comedy has recently been underappreciated, the seriousness has never been properly recognized and valued for what it is—a highly intelligent, absolutely distinctive take on life that instructs through hugely pleasing art. It's therefore a good sign that, though they've attracted little notice from reviewers or academics, some recent books about Amis have been appearing. In 1989 Richard Bradford and John McDermott both produced short, critically perceptive studies of the novels, and in 1990 Dale Salwak edited a lively collection of essays by English and American writers about the man and his work. More recently Mr. Salwak has followed up with a biographical and critical account; Merritt Moseley has surveyed the novels briefly; and, most agreeably, Paul Fussell has written a passion-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ate apologia for Amis as a man of letters.[1] There remain plenty of distinctions to be made about the novels in relation to one another and their collective force as an achievement.

In titling his book *The Anti-Egotist*, Mr. Fussell must have expected that more than one reader, seeing the epithet applied to Kingsley Amis, would respond, "Are you kidding?" For no one ever accused the novelist of undervaluing his own ego. I remember a symposium about something or other, in London twenty years ago, in which Amis, when he was introduced as a participant, stood up and swung his clasped hands above him like a heavyweight acknowledging the crowd. Instead of egotism, Fussell stresses Amis' disinterested devotion to writing, to literary tradition, to language, also his generosity toward his readers. The focus is on Amis' nonfiction and literary learning: "His performance as a critic, a learned anthologist, a memoirist, a teacher, and a poet—in short, a man of letters in the old sense, a writer conspicuous for complex literary knowledge and subtle taste as well as for vigorous views on politics and society." In these terms Amis would take his place as a late example of a tradition in British letters sketched by John Gross in *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*. Predecessors in that tradition include George Saintsbury, who resembles Amis in his devotion to drink as well as to books—the Saintsbury whom Amis once characterized as "debarred by nature from writing anything not worth reading." The comment suits Amis as well, whose literary knowledge is surely not as wide as Saintsbury's (whose is?) but who, unlike Saintsbury, produces novels and poems of his own.

Early in the book it looks as if Fussell's friendship with Amis, which he makes no attempt to conceal, may get in the way of objectivity in this portrait of the artist as anti-egotist. I at least was pulled up short when, by way of arguing for Amis' "generosity" as not just "a literary or abstract value" but a very tangible one, he confides to us that one Christmas, Amis "loaded my young son with wonderful costly gifts, including his first typewriter, because he wanted to augment his self-respect and make him happy." Doubtless the case, but it puts us in a slightly awkward position of having looked in on a private act we really have no business knowing about—this is the risk of Fussell's avowedly personal treatment. As another example of generosity he notes that once Amis, at a lunch party in Wales, gave the waitress an extravagant tip (the equivalent of fifty dollars or so) because he was so struck by her "intelligence, charm, generosity, and humor." I've no doubt she was a splendid person but would be interested to know more about what she looked like, especially whether she was, as the

[1] KINGSLEY AMIS: Modern Novelist, by *Dale Salwak*. Barnes & Noble Books. $64.50. UNDERSTANDING KINGSLEY AMIS, by *Merritt Moseley*. University of South Carolina Press. $29.95. THE ANTI-EGOTIST: Kingsley Amis, Man of Letters, by *Paul Fussell*. Oxford University Press. $23.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

expression goes, full-figured. There are moments, in other words, when Fussell sounds a little too eager to attest to his friend's sterling moral qualities; whereas readers of the novels get used to thinking of him always as a bit of an old devil.

But if in a couple of places claims for Amis' stalwart nature sound a little like a friend's warm recollection of good acts performed, the claims Fussell makes about Amis' contribution as a man of letters are eminently valid and presented with a documentation—admittedly in the brief span of this short book—that strikes me as undeniable. In particular he draws attention to Amis' performance in areas insufficiently remarked, such as his work as an anthologist, his writing about food and drink, his "amateur" comments on classical music, and his poetry. Amis has done a number of anthologies, all of them distinctive and rewarding (though I have not seen his most recent, *The Pleasures of Poetry*, a collection of poems, each accompanied by brief commentary, which appeared over the course of a year in *The Daily Mail*). Of these anthologies, the most autobiographical is *The Amis Anthology* (1988), a gathering of his favorite poems, not the "best" poems in English. He says that a "favorite" poem is attractive to an individual in part for reasons that are unfathomable. A favorite poem must produce "the illusion that it was written specially for me, however well I may know that it was in fact written for the whole nation . . . or for nobody in particular." Of course no one else would title a collection *The Amis Anthology*, and no one but the compiler would include Matthew Arnold's "Rugby Chapel," a surely overlong and rhythmically undistinguished elegy for Arnold's father ("Fifteen years have gone round / Since thou arosest to tread, / In the summer morning, the road / Of death, at a call unforeseen, / Sudden . . ."). But include it Amis does, and in the notes that follow the anthology (37 pages of explanation and comment) Amis says about "Rugby Chapel" that

> It is hard for us today not to feel from time to time, when words, like *arosest* or *beckonedst* come along, that the forms of the second person plural would have been more natural. But to Arnold's readers in the 1850s, in that context, they might very well have seemed intolerably familiar and indecorous. If faced with the counter-argument that a poet should make a point of not catering to his readers' expectations, one could answer in turn that he should not bother with such trivial concerns when writing about something as important as his father's life and death.

This direct appeal to what "we" might feel and what readers in 1850 might be imagined to have felt, is extremely thoughtful in the unobvious point it worries, and could only have come from an editor who can't or won't tell us why "Rugby Chapel" is a favorite, but who protects its manner of address by invoking subject matter rather than

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

technique. This is a small example of how personal choice gets embodied in the selection.

As for food and drink, which Amis has taken pains not to deny himself over the years, his performance as a restaurant critic is memorable for its vigorous response to pretentious language and to restaurants that fail to deliver the goods. Thus the venerable Rules, of London, gets its dues for serving "two of the most disgusting full-dress meals I have ever tried to eat in my life" (details follow). Of a fellow food-reviewer who announces that "A Hong Kong meal . . . is a statement to which customers are secondary," Amis replies, "I know that sort of meal and the statement is Fuck You, and you don't have to go to Hong Kong for it. Soho is far enough." As for the drink part, over twenty years ago Amis wrote a masterwork on the subject, *On Drink*, a guide to the pleasures and perils of alcohol that is surprisingly little-known. (I've loaned it to a number of friends and miraculously still retain my copy.) The best parts of *On Drink* aren't the recipes for drinks you've never heard of before and probably won't get around to trying,[2] but rather the section titled "Mean Sod's Guide," a handbook to stinting your male guests "while seeming, at any rate to their wives, to have done them rather well." (The idea is to provoke a quarrel on the way home between the couple in which "she" defends you as sweet and thoughtful, while "he" labels you a drunk.) Out of many tips I select one, the procedure for dealing with the person who refuses to be content with your pre-dinner serving of a punch made with cheap red wine, soda water, and some cooking sherry, to be served in small glasses. A recalcitrant guest who insists, say, on Scotch should receive the following treatment: "Go to your pantry and read the paper for a few minutes before filling the order. Hand the glass over with plenty of emphasis, perhaps bawling as you do so, 'One large Scotch whisky delivered as ordered, *sah*!'"

But the most original part of this wholly original book is its section on dealing with the Hangover. No reader of *Lucky Jim* will be surprised in the least at Amis' mastery of the subject; even so it is with painful pleasure that we follow him through the steps in dealing, first, with the Physical Hangover ("I must assume that you can devote at least a good part of the day to yourself and your condition"), then, more significantly, the Metaphysical Hangover. For the latter Amis prescribes short courses in literature and music, on the principle that you must feel worse emotionally before you can start to feel better, so that a good cry is essential. For the reading course he prescribes the final scene of *Paradise Lost*, or—if you want something less "horribly

[2] Such as Queen Victoria's Tipple (½ tumbler red wine, Scotch) or The Lucky Jim (12 to 15 parts vodka, 1 part dry vermouth, 2 parts cucumber juice, cucumber slices, ice cubes). Obviously the cucumber juice makes all the difference to the latter. Or there is the Tigne Rose (1 tot gin, 1 tot whisky, 1 tot rum, 1 tot vodka, 1 tot brandy). That one, says Amis, is "a drink to dream of, not to drink."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

great"—A.E. Housman's poems. For music, don't set your sights too high by going for Mozart. Pick someone instead who is "merely a towering genius," like Tchaikovsky, preferably the *Pathétique* symphony. Or perhaps Brahms's *Alto Rhapsody* which, especially in the Kathleen Ferrier version, would "fetch tears from a stone."

Mention of these musical treatments for the Metaphysical Hangover is occasion for a word on Amis' interest as, every now and then, a writer about classical music. From Philip Larkin's account of Oxford days we know how much time he and Amis spent listening to American jazz; less well known—especially after letting Jim Dixon refer to "filthy Mozart"—is how much Amis cares about "serious" music and how that caring gets into his writing. At a farcical level it was first evident to me when I realized that, in *Lucky Jim*, the "Welch tune" "featured in the 'rondo' of some boring piano concerto" and which Dixon sings to himself ("You *ig*norant clod, you *stu*pid old sod, you *ha*vering, *sla*vering get . . . You *wor*dy old *tur*dy old scum, you *gri*ping old, *pi*ping old bum") is in fact the main theme from the last movement of Beethoven's First. For some years I thought this my private discovery, but Amis has since made it public knowledge in a 1982 piece on the summer Proms concerts at the Albert Hall. Then there is his poem, "A Chromatic Passing-Note," that begins

> "That slimy tune" I said, and got a laugh,
> In the middle of old Franck's D minor thing:
> The dotted-rhythm clarinet motif.

It's a good poem partly because at a certain state of musical "sophistication" one might well be on guard against possibly sentimental tunes like that dotted clarinet motif in Franck's symphony. That Amis (in the same "Proms" piece) refers to the symphony as "miraculous" suggests that his later self has more than come to terms with it. No such accommodation, apparently, has been made with Mahler; at least to the opening of the first movement of his First Symphony. The narrator of *Girl, 20*, hearing the piece rehearsed, reflects that its length was

> a considerable mercy, seeing that it might so easily have been something broad, full, ample, spacious, massive, leisurely and going on for over half an hour from the Second or the Third. Thanks to some paroxysm of curtailment on the composer's part, I was in for little more than fifteen minutes' worth.

You don't have to agree with Douglas Yandell (and I'm pretty sure Amis as well) about Mahler's "enormous talentlessness" to note that the passage—which contains further particulars—could have been written only by someone who's spent time registering the works of "Gus"; while the phrase "paroxysm of curtailment" marks one more

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in a long list of Amis' fine-tuned surprises. At the end of a piece entitled "Rondo for my Funeral" (1973) he wrote that as a source of pleasure music took precedence for him over literature, but that as an amateur he could never do more than "catch glimpses of the world of mysterious, ideal beauty that music offers." It takes courage to say this, as well as courage to admit that your favorite composer (not the Greatest composer) is Tchaikovsky. I have heard no one but Amis admit this, and it recommends him to me since my favorite composer is Tchaikovsky.

Elsewhere I've expressed my admiration for Amis' poetry, now a thing of his past evidently. That leaves us with the novels, which like Tchaikovsky's music are pervaded by a melancholy that's grown as Amis has aged. Yet at the root of them is something other than melancholy though not incompatible with it, a comic-satiric energy that carries the novelist again and again into the things in this world which call out to be rendered, sometimes rended. There is a fine moment at the close of Robert Frost's 1960 *Paris Review* interview when he ponders the nature of what young people call poetic "inspiration":

> But I tell them it's just the same as when you feel a joke coming. You see somebody coming down the street that you're accustomed to abuse, and you feel it rising in you, something to say as you pass each other. . . . Something does it to you. It's him coming toward you that gives you the animus, you know. When they want to know about inspiration, I tell them it's mostly animus.

Amis' inspiration is mostly animus and I suppose only readers who delight in this "abuse" will find tonic and indispensable such astringencies. Yet the animus may sound merely windy unless it finds the right words for itself, and no English novelist of the last few decades has paid closer attention to his words—indeed to language itself—than has Amis. Almost thirty years ago, in what was perhaps the first incisive piece of criticism provoked by his early novels, David Lodge declared unequivocally that Amis' use of language was "as inextricably part of his importance as Henry James's was of his or Joyce's was of his." Lodge was countering the tendency to consider those novels as social documents showing off the angry young man at odds with English conventions and society. By way of redirecting readers, Lodge noted Amis' habit of picking up words and subjecting them to sceptical, playful attention, as in Jim Dixon's mockery of the mindless article he's written, "The Economic Influence of the Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450–1485": "'In considering this strangely neglected topic,' it began. This what neglected topic? This strangely what topic? This strangely neglected what?" In "superficially clumsy prose," said Lodge, Amis explored and exploited his fastidious

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

contempt for and large pleasure in "strange locutions, odd pronunciations, verbal errors and unconscious puns."

The Russian Girl, his most recent novel published in this country, won't cause anyone to claim that it's his best since *Lucky Jim*, but it's a wholly professional tale about a Russian scholar at a London institute who falls in love with a visiting Russian poet named Anna Danilova. The trouble is that Anna's poetry is dreadful and the scholar, Richard Vaisey, knows it, even as she enlists him in a political cause—the freeing of her brother who's been arrested, with or without justice, back in the motherland. There is much interesting talk about poetry, politics, love and sex, which bears out Fussell's observation of how Amis' novels sometimes resemble "anthologies of opinions" more than they do fictions. But the places where the book comes to its sharpest and funniest pitch are those in which Richard's wife, Cordelia, is on stage, either in her own person or as the subject of others' disbelieving conversation:

> "Cordelia's the sort of woman—"
>
> "If you mention her again I'm leaving," said Richard quite violently. "Not another word on that subject while I'm here. And by the way she isn't a *sort* of woman."
>
> "And it's even doubtful if she's a sort of *woman*," said Godfrey.

Her very name inspires another character's awe: "What a *name* for Christ's sake—Cordelia or Nggornndeenlia as I suppose she calls it. What's wrong with Cordy? Or Deely? See you down the boozer, Cordy. She'd vanish in a puff of smoke." ("Old Cordybags" is yet another riff on the name.) When the woman in question is herself on the phone, she provokes a "plebeian-voiced" caller into the following:

> "Paki, are you, love?"
>
> "I beg your pardon."
>
> "Well, I beg yours and all, madam. I just thought, the way you talk, ennit. Was it Europe, then? I said was it Europe?"
>
> "Vug of, uzzhaul," she said in an eerily unchanged voice, cut him off and punched another number.

When Richard leaves his wife for the Russian Girl, Cordelia launches a series of fiendishly successful attacks on his library, unfinished manuscript, car, and credit card account in a dazzling burst of creative malice. The wife who turns out a shrew has been a recurrent feature in Amis' more recent fiction, especially Susan Duke in *Stanley and the Women*. But never before has there been one as magnificently awful as the perfectly misnamed Cordelia. One can argue about whether Amis is misogynist; or one can wonder at the astonishing energy he accords his female targets, thus magnifying rather than diminishing them.

Henry James once provided "a delightful young man from Texas" named Stark Young with two lists of his novels as guidance for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reading the Master's work, on both of which lists were *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*. On the pretense that some similarly delightful person should ask me for similar help with respect to Amis' work, my two lists would both contain *Lucky Jim* and *The Old Devils*. The former, endlessly rereadable, always fresh and newly funny, is the comic masterwork of our century's second half; while the latter, in some ways Amis' most difficult book stylistically, is dense not only with satiric energies but with two scenes between characters that touch the heart. At least they elicited tears from this hard-boiled reader who never expected to shed them over Amis. On at least one of my lists I'd want *Ending Up*, his shortest novel and most ingeniously verbal working out of the end of five octogenarians living together in a small cottage. And I'd hate for any reader to miss *Girl, 20*, in its ironic celebration of Swinging London and the attempts of a classical music conductor, Sir Roy Vandervane, to swing with it.[3] After that the lists would include *Stanley and the Women*, Amis' strongest onslaught on the psychiatric profession; or *I Want It Now*, in which the rich get their comeuppance; or *The Alteration*, a dystopian-futuristic vision of a Roman Catholic world; or *The Riverside Villas Murder*, a delightful visit to the mind of an adolescent youth growing up in the late-1930s and awakening to sex (the murder part is less interesting). And what about *The Anti-Death League* or *The Green Man* or *Jake's Thing* or *The Folks That Live on the Hill*? Two lists of five aren't big enough, no more than they are with James.[4]

A recent, strikingly candid and unillusioned interview in a London *Times* Saturday Supplement reveals the following about Amis: no, he tells the interviewer, he doesn't suffer from self-disgust exactly (Auberon Waugh had guessed that he did). But maybe a little bit "when you wish you weren't so fat and so old." Self-hatred? "Yes, from time to time." The interviewer is emboldened to ask Amis whether he likes himself: "No, I don't think I do like myself all that much . . . but I don't want to have to think about that." Dale Salwak quotes him as saying that writing is the only meaningful activity he enjoys, the only possible antidote to the "terrible feeling of gloom and panic and Christ knows what that a combination of drink and the aging process seemed to usher in." That out of such feelings the novels still keep coming regularly, each one giving us something a little different from anything given before, each a fresh entry into the English language and English humor, seems grounds for making the strongest insistence on his absolutely unique and irreplaceable contribution to the art of fiction in our time.

[3] *Girl, 20* contains one of Amis' finest inventions, the "Fuckettes" wielded by Sir Roy Vandervane as "obscenity-savers." They include School of Thought, Christian Gentleman, Puck-Like Theme, and other phrases to be used in moments of stress.

[4] Since this was written I have read Amis' new novel *You Can't Do Both* (not yet published in this country) and rank it at the top with *Lucky Jim* and *The Old Devils*.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TOM WILHELMUS

Ranches of Isolation

> For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
> In the valley of its making where executives
> Would never want to tamper, flows on south
> From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in. . . .
> —Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats"

E.M. FORSTER ONCE FELT IT WAS NECESSARY to state his belief in "personal relationships" even though modern psychoanalysis had put the whole idea of personhood in doubt. These days he might feel a similar need to defend the author, who has become no longer a person but rather an occasion for bringing the text into being, an object who may conveniently be analyzed away, like the fire which physics and chemistry have resolved into so much ash, so much kinetic energy, so much gas.

Reviewers and biographers have continued to speak about the author, but in scholarly and philosophical discussions his presence is far from *de rigueur*. The most famous postmodernist pronouncement to this effect is Foucault's assertion that as a matter of philosophical interest the author is dead. All the interest now centers on the reader, by contrast still very much alive. Nonetheless, I feel the compulsion to think of the author as a solid, historical human entity, with whom I am dealing whenever I read a text, to imagine his substantiality even though he or she is, of course, as much a creature of my invention as a creature of fact.

He makes himself known to me in ways which are hardly reliable, arising either from inferences about the text itself or from the surrounding buzz of rumors, publicity, prizes, reviews, dust jackets, biographies, book tours, curriculum vitae, and the like. Still, it is possible to regard him or her as a "person" since the same type of invention is required to create the public aspect of anyone—including me. So maybe it is my own right to exist I am defending when I think of him as real: both of us, I imagine, are ranches of loneliness and isolation constructing ourselves through an effort of imagination and will. Whatever solidarity I feel with him originates in this mutuality of isolation, in sympathy and the need for a "personal relationship" that no cautions against the "intentional" or "affective" fallacies, no post-structuralist yammering about the death of the author can quite eliminate. Why does one read or write otherwise?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Even the rather conservative, and perhaps wistfully naive, notion that we read only to experience the reality of the text itself without paying any attention to the author seems doubtful. It lasts only so long as we are thinking of one story, not a collection—or one volume in an author's canon, not two. The minute a second, or subsequent, work becomes part of the consideration, we accept the inevitability that the author himself or herself looms as a presence to be reckoned with. "What do Maxine Kumin's essays and stories have to do with one another?" "How does Cormac McCarthy's new work compare with his last?" These questions are not impermissible. As readers we cannot avoid them, nor as an act of solidarity and responsibility would we want to.

Who is this Cormac McCarthy, then, whose gaze fixes us aggressively from the dust jacket photo of his new book, *The Crossing*? The question is even more insistent since this novel is the second volume of his Border Trilogy preceded by *All the Pretty Horses*, which won both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1993.

In that novel, McCarthy was or appeared to be a person fascinated by classic western stories to which he brought an evocative lyricism, great powers of description, and a rich imaginative identification with characters and situations which, to judge from its reception, revitalized an essentially nostalgic literary form for thousands of readers. *All the Pretty Horses* described a trip to Mexico by two young Texans, joined by a third, who cross the border essentially for the adventure and stay to break horses and to fall in love. And the author seemed a rather crusty but magnanimous soul, creating the kind of portraiture one would expect to find in a sculpture by Frederic Remington.

That expectation, however, is radically altered by *The Crossing*,[1] a book which, although it contains not one but three such trips by a similar set of characters, seems more like an exercise in religious mysticism and medieval romance than an evocation of cowboy life. Each new "crossing" describes events which are a little more bizarre and mystifying than the last. And the author himself is more difficult to decipher.

The first crossing is a novella-length piece which describes the son of a New Mexico rancher, sixteen-year-old Billy Parham, engaged in his first man-sized adventure, who traps a wolf that has been killing their stock and, instead of killing her, attempts to return her to her native lair in the mountains of Mexico. In spirit this portion of the novel comes closest to *All the Pretty Horses*, showing the same fascination with detail (in this case the lore, now nearly lost, of trapping predators) and the same imaginative identification with the young, uninitiated hero. Just why Billy prefers to leave his family and return

[1] THE CROSSING, by *Cormac McCarthy*. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the wolf to her home is not explained, but it must have something to do with rituals of manhood, fairness, honor, and self-sufficiency.

At this point, however, inferences about the young cowboy's motivations begin to give way to questions that have little relationship to what he actually thinks or feels, and Billy becomes less a vehicle for discovering things about life and about himself than a vehicle for his creator's long meditation on fate and the human condition. What was a rather straightforward tale, reminiscent of Zane Grey or John Ford, comes to take on the appearance of Cervantes, a picaresque tale replete with traveling circuses, wayside tales of moral significance, and wandering gypsies. Time and again the forward movement of Billy's journey is interrupted by chance encounters in which implausible characters tell stories in which they argue with fate and God, describe the horrors of war, or discuss sex or the meaning of mortality, and then disappear. Nor do their discussions have any noticeable effect on Billy or his quest.

At the beginning of his second crossing, Billy, whose parents had been killed while he was away during the first, returns to Mexico with his brother to search for the killers and the horses they have stolen. Somewhere in the middle of this crossing, however, amidst all this talk, he seems to have forgotten his purpose. And having attained neither goal and having lost his brother besides, Billy returns to the States as much a victim of circumstance as he began. Nor when he returns to Mexico a third time are we any more sure about what he has learned.

The Crossing does contain some of the excellent style for which McCarthy has been widely praised since *All the Pretty Horses* appeared, including lush descriptions of western landscapes, details about frontier life, and laconic and humorous dialogue. Some of the finest moments are those in which Billy, the tightlipped adherent to a well-defined code of masculine frontier behavior, displays a hard-won honesty and homespun intelligence in appropriately economical expression: "I guess I've got to say that I don't understand the first thing about [women]," says Billy, to which his companion replies, "Well . . . At least you aint took to lyin." Too often, however, this kind of statement contrasts with others in which McCarthy, at his most Faulknerian and unintelligible, attributes to Billy an awareness out of keeping with his behavior or his understanding: "What he saw was the only manifest artifact of the history of this negligible republic where he now seemed about to die that had the least authority or meaning or claim to substance was seated here before him in the sallow light of this cantina and all else from men's lips or from men's pens would require that it be beat out hot all over again upon the anvil of its own enactment before it could even qualify as a lie."

All this presents a picture of an author very different from the one who wrote *All the Pretty Horses*. Neither the youthful, masculine adventurer he solemnly celebrates nor the historian-chronicler of a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bygone age, he now seems like a religious visionary whose extravagant linguistic gestures isolate and entrap him within a singular and dark meditation. Other facts reinforce this impression—rumors about McCarthy's personal obscurity, his Pynchon-like desire to hide from the public, his Faulknerian refusal to comment on his own work, perhaps most of all the fascination with cruelty in his novels prior to *All the Pretty Horses*, a fascination which re-emerges in *The Crossing*. The final lurid, and to my mind gratuitous, episode of *The Crossing*, which describes Billy's recovery of his dead brother's bones, is the most striking evidence of the difference in the two novels and opens a whole new insight into the author's persona, a forbidding insight for what it may reveal in the concluding novel in the Border Trilogy which is yet to come.

A wholly different kind of personality gives rise to E.L Doctorow's new novel *The Waterworks*,[2] a book which derives many of its energies from the author's familiar liberal values already evident in novels from *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime* to *Billy Bathgate* and *World's Fair*. Also, like the latter two, it continues Doctorow's project of exploring the history of New York City albeit in a new and interesting mode.

In place of the gilded, tepid metropolis described by Edith Wharton in *The Age of Innocence*, in *The Waterworks* Doctorow creates another, set in the same time period, teeming with people, vital, energetic, avaricious, barbarous and corrupt—the city of Boss Tweed, filthy and impoverished, trying to wrest a civic identity, civic institutions, and city services from the chaos of: "Almost a million people . . . everyone securing his needs in a state of cheerful degeneracy."

The story he creates is a thriller, a Stevensonian detective drama about an evil genius, Dr. Sartorius, who lengthens the lives of the corrupt rich by preying upon the city's thousands of poor orphans. The discovery of Sartorius' plot involves the efforts of a group of people representing a spectrum of the city's moral and intellectual leadership—a wily editor, an ineffectual minister, a bohemian artist, and an unconventional and incorruptible police detective. The plot also employs a familiar Doctorow device, the search for a missing father, and results in the opportunity to choose between a corrupt biological father and a couple of benign surrogates. The first of these alternatives is McIlvaine, the editor, also the narrator, who as the voice of the people has all the earmarks of a conventional Doctorow hero. The second is Donne, the police detective, a representative of what the city lacks, namely good institutions, responsive to the needs of the populace.

The evil Sartorius, however, is by far the most interesting character in the book. Civil War surgeon and medical genius, he allows his Jekyll-like scientific investigations to transgress the barriers of de-

[2] THE WATERWORKS, by *E.L. Doctorow*. Random House. $23.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cency and to turn him into a monstrous Mr. Hyde. By comparison to Dr. Sartorius—whose complexity threatens to run away with the novel—McIlvaine, Donne and the other characters are sketchy indeed in this brief, 253-page novel.

Yet, in fairness, the real significance of *The Waterworks* depends less on its characterizations or its descriptions of city life than on a disguised reference it makes to the medical reform issues of the 1990s. When the few, in this case the rich, abetted by corrupt, self-serving politicians, who are in charge of institutions which were established for the good of all, seek to extend their own lives (although the quality of that life is negligible) with the aid of a medical apparatus which, having got its hands on the bureaucrats, is only interested in pursuing the logic of what's possible and profitable—at the expense of the many, especially the young—you have a story as applicable to the present times as to the 1870s. Such a theme, illustrative of Doctorow's abiding convictions, is timely and instructive—if only someone would listen.

But, as Auden says, poetry changes nothing. It speaks from ranches of isolation to other ranches of isolation and is a lonely business whose political consequences are small. This is a lesson well-known among the Irish whose greatest artists have spoken with bitterest irony at a nation's intractability, its sad inability to rise up and solve its own troubles. Thus, in her new novel, when Edna O'Brien speaks of a *House of Splendid Isolation*,[3] her use of the word "splendid" is itself splendidly ironic, confronting once again issues too recognizably familiar though inimicable to solutions. And perhaps one grows tired and impatient with the lessons no one seems willing to learn. "History," O'Brien says, "is everywhere." "A house remembers" but also "an outhouse remembers." A people "ruminate," but nothing happens.

The central situation of *House of Splendid Isolation* is the relationship between an elderly Irish widow, Josie O'Meara, and an I.R.A. terrorist who has taken refuge in her house. At the core of their encounter stands isolation itself, class from class, gender from gender, political ideology from political ideology in an atmosphere not only hateful but also selfish and occasionally indifferent. Nor do all the failures to communicate have their origin in politics. Mrs. O'Meara's own isolation begins in her encapsulated childhood, her years as a maid in Brooklyn, and her loveless marriage to a besotted horse-breeding member of the local gentry. Its sources include her entrapment in a traditional marriage and in traditional women's roles, her emerging desire for freedom, culture, and passion, and the offense she has given to custom for which she is shunned by her small-minded neighbors. This is territory O'Brien knows well, covered in stories from the beginning of her career—the plight of Irish women in an

[3] HOUSE OF SPLENDID ISOLATION, by *Edna O'Brien*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $21.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

oppressively traditional environment. The story is at least as old as Joyce's "Eveline" in *Dubliners*. Finally, however, it is the additional isolation of age, of missed opportunities, of a life felt to be wasted, and a growing indifference to living itself which hang on Josie O'Meara more.

Less familiar territory is O'Brien's creation of McGreevy, the I.R.A. terrorist also known as The Beast, who is nonetheless a too-familiar creature of Irish history and legend. A similarly successful rendering of his isolation originates in his shattered family, his murdered wife and child, his sense of duty, and the combined insult and adulation heaped on him by the press, his fellow gunmen, and the police for his success at a murderous trade. It originates also in the absolute codes of silence and self-sufficiency forced on him by prison and by his profession. As a creature he has risen to the level of his own abstraction, dehumanized by his legendary success.

When they first confront each other, Mrs. O'Meara and McGreevy have almost no points of contact. When they part in the novel's final violent episode they have touched each other on only a few. There is no sentimental forgiveness, little evidence that the two have understood each other. It is a measure of Edna O'Brien's artistry that the most human moment of their encounter is one in which McGreevy and Mrs. O'Meara dance around in her kitchen, attempting to avoid being stung by wasps. Excellently, the moment is utterly misinterpreted by a couple of onlooking guards as "'an orgy . . . an orgy'" as the "two bodies rise, then caper around the room, meeting and parrying like lovers." It is a fine moment, like the one at the end of Donald Barthelme's "Margins" where the two characters, one black, one white, communicate in the only way they know how by slapping each other "sharply in the face with the back of the hand—that beautiful part of the hand where the knuckles grow."

This, then, is my sense of the house's "splendid" isolation, its ironic hauteur. Like the country and the individuals it commemorates, it is locked in private necessity that it will take much time and history and violence to cure. Nonetheless, Mrs. O'Meara does at the last moment attempt to throw herself between McGreevy and the guards' bullets. Somehow, she has learned instinctively that "the same blood and the same tears drop from the enemy as from the self"—which is knowledge, "the future knowledge," which Edna O'Brien says will be needed if the country is to awaken and endure.

Finally, Maxine Kumin's new book *Women, Animals, and Vegetables: Essays and Stories*[4] creates a convincing portrait of a woman who seems to have gone Yeats one better, creating perfection of the work as well as the life, or at the very least has demonstrated how the two in rare instances may coincide. Having moved twenty years ago from subur-

[4] WOMEN, ANIMALS, AND VEGETABLES: Essays and Stories, by *Maxine Kumin*. W.W. Norton. $25.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ban Boston to a New Hampshire farm, for reasons detailed in the essay "Long Road to an Upland Farm," she has also demonstrated how isolation itself and an attentive reflection on the tasks of everyday life, are conducive to the creative process, an issue discussed in another essay entitled "Menial Labor and the Muse."

For people who do not care about how art and life are related or who are likely to dispute the comforts of horses, dogs, jam, mushrooms, and country life in general, this book may seem to contain a bit too much granola or be a bit too recondite and tame. Nonetheless, the care Kumin brings to the work would grace any profession, and the details, descriptions, and advice regarding such things as the care, feeding, training, breeding, and parturition of horses, the raising of mushrooms or exotic vegetables, or the making of jam are precise, informative, and practical (many of them originally appeared in magazines like *Country Journal, Countryside*, and *Organic Gardening*).

At the same time, they bring an outlook to these practices that is arcadian in flavor and intention. By example if not by pronouncement, Kumin reminds us of the close relationship between poetry and pastoral, and while the times are not receptive to the connection, in some fashion these essays are her *Works and Days* and lend substance to her conviction that her writing "depends on the well-being that devolves from" a list of "chores undertaken and completed," on "contentment in isolation [which] pervades every good working day," and on "the haunting appeal of enclosure, the mindless suspension of doing simple, repetitive tasks . . . that allows those free-associative leaps out of which a poem may occasionally come."

From these reflections it is but a simple, though necessary, step to the stories, which extend the values of the life she describes in the essays to scenes and situations which both challenge and confirm their assumptions. Introduced by a quote she has borrowed from Virginia Woolf that "Fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners," several of the stories make a direct reference to the values Kumin has learned from farm life and from living closely with the cycle of nature. These include "Solstice," which is about the process of grieving compensated for by service to the environment, and "The Cassandra Effect," about a case of olfactory hysteria originating in unresolved conflicts from childhood, compensated for by a love of horses. More generalized are stories which deal with family conflicts through several generations, particularly of women, where the need for some kind of retreat, usually into nature or the natural, balances the disruptions and distortions of contemporary life. For example, "Beginning with Gussie" is a story about three generations of independent, professional women—mother, daughter, and granddaughter—whose very independence threatens their relationship until a birth draws them together. Such a bond, originating in mutual need and mutual affection, may even span the gulf between a hunter and a radical

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

environmentalist, whose love affair in "The Match" seems natural despite their conflicting political philosophies. And the final story, "Flotation Devices," originally published in this magazine, is about a snorkeling expedition and three professional women who get separated from their group and wind up stranded on a rock—an understated study in resourcefulness, truth discovered in isolation, and solace in shared response: which is, after all, a sensible description of its author.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DEAN FLOWER

Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story

LET US BEGIN BY SOLVING THE MYSTERY of "The Purloined Letter."

The first solution is that what is stolen and hidden is out in the open, in plain sight. Dupin sees what the Prefect of Police cannot, blinded as he is by mere rationality and the failure to imagine a cleverer criminal. Dupin does this, easily obtains the letter, and the case is closed.

The second solution is that Dupin's triumph is not over the Prefect of Police but over the evil Minister D—, who has gained an unscrupulous ascendancy over a woman of royal stature, using the compromising letter for blackmail and extortion. Dupin puts himself in his opponent's place, imagines how the devious D— has deceived the police, and in a clever series of moves extracts the letter by deceiving the deceiver. Royalty is protected and justice is served, along with poetic justice.

The third solution is that Dupin's triumph is not what he pretends: he already knows the Minister D— extremely well: the distinctive handwriting, the acuity of his "lynx eye," his deceptive languor and fastidious habits, his family seal or coat-of-arms, his skill as both poet and mathematician, his experience as courtier and "bold *intriguant*." So familiar are the two of them that Dupin can visit D— as if "by accident" and bring up "a topic which I knew well had never failed to interest and excite him." Hence it could not have been any great feat for Dupin to imagine his opponent's moves and foil them. Nor does he have any very noble motives of his own. He reveals at the end of the story that D— once did him "an evil turn" in Vienna, and he relishes getting his revenge.

The fourth solution is that Dupin and the Minister D— are more than acquainted: they are doubles, *semblables*, *frères*, enemies who shadow and mimic one another. Both are poets *and* mathematicians, both are immersed in the Parisian debates about algebra, both are outwardly languorous and inwardly energetic, both are deceivers and manipulators. Both disguise their eyes and steal the letter, leaving a facsimile in its place. Poe underscores the *Doppelgänger* design largely through a rich array of—appropriately—double meanings: "I knew him," says Dupin, "as both mathematician and poet," which means simultaneously "I knew him *to be* both" and "I knew him because *I was*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

both." Similarly, "I knew him as a courtier, too, and as a bold *intriguant*." The mathematical sense of an identity (x = x) lurks in Dupin's explanation, "It is merely . . . an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent." A narcissistic mirror self is suggested in "But the more I reflected upon the daring, dashing, and discriminating ingenuity of D— . . ." All the alliteration indicates too that we decipher "D—" as "Dupin." In Dupin's final message to the enemy he wishes "to be even with," he quotes from a Crébillon play about Atreus and Thyestes, apparently unaware of how much the allusion damns him along with his opponent.

The fifth solution is that "The Purloined Letter" is about its own letters, i.e., about its own making and decoding. The alliteration of the letter D goes well beyond a mere signal of resemblance between two characters to dramatize the presence of a persistent cipher running throughout the text. Call it, as the story does, "the D— cipher." It represents the writer's mystery (cipher), the means he uses to code it, and the pressure he puts on the reader to solve (decipher) it. Or else call it the story's "D" sign, i.e., design—especially insofar as that design is dark, duplicitous, devious, deceptive, daring, dashing, discriminating, desperate, diabolical, and destructive. It is destructive especially of the conventional reader's expectations of logic and sense. It welcomes all puns, all the apparent accidents and coincidences of letters, words, and meanings. It revels in a repetition compulsion: try discussing the story without resorting to ludicrous iterations of *d*-words. It calls attention to Poe's actual writing of the story and to the reader's awareness of its status as printed document. "He is well acquainted with my MS.," says Dupin, meaning his handwriting, but the words suggest that D— already knows the manuscript, or has had a hand in writing it; and, as the story comes to its close, so does the reader know it and have a hand in its creation. Poe has thus purloined the letter D, and used it to make his own dazzling and duplicitous design.

The sixth solution is that Poe anticipated clever readers of mysteries, even as he invited them into the ingenious labyrinth of his own making. His epigraph, attributed to Seneca but Poe's own invention, is a warning: "*Nil sapientiae odiosius acumine nimio*," or "Nothing is more repugnant to good sense than excess cunning." In effect, a mirror of self-consciousness has been placed at the start: any really interesting solution to this story will be undercut by the recognition that it appeals to our own ingenuity and cunning. Yet how can we negotiate the story's complexities without cunning? Another sort of mirror is placed at the end of the story, which also contains a warning: the two characters who steal the letter to gain power and prestige for themselves and to humiliate another person end up like Atreus and Thyestes in a stalemate of repetitious revenge. What better rebuke could there be to critics who would appropriate "letters" only for the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

display of their own ingenuity or the aggrandizement of their own theories?

None of my "solutions" is final, nor do these six by any means exhaust the possibilities. In fact, one may seem to be further from a solution *after* analysis, rather than before it. Which dramatizes a very curious thing: that multiple solutions, or the idea of problematic "solutions," was imbedded in the genre from its inception with Poe in the 1840s, but most of his followers have ruled it out. Convention at least, if not rule, dictates that Holmes and Wimsey, Miss Marple and Maigret, even the richly mistaken Trent and the blundering Morse, offer us the correct solution at last. But Poe's stories work differently, both more self-consciously and more mysteriously, in ways that have made them a favorite "site" for debates on modern critical theory. See for example the dispute between Jacques Lacan ("Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,' " 1957) and Jacques Derrida ("The Purveyor of Truth," 1975) over the essential structure of the story: is it a repetition of Oedipal triangles or a quadrilateral figure of doubled and split identities?[1] Or—like Dupin outwitting his double—is Derrida's theory driven by a deeper design to outwit its Lacanian precursor, circumscribing one clever solution with another even more sophisticated one?

That is John T. Irwin's argument, placed at the beginning of his labyrinthine study of the genre Poe invented.[2] Irwin sees both the value and futility of competing solutions. He summarizes the Lacan-Derrida dispute over "The Purloined Letter," and suggests that the two critics have unwittingly played the game of "even and odd" which Dupin describes in the story—a "schoolboy" game of guessing whether another child holds an even or odd number of marbles behind his back. In Irwin's reading, Dupin and the Minister D— play this game as well, investigating a mystery which in Dupin's words is "simple and odd," each besting his rival "to be even with him." Irwin suggests that Lacan's triangles and Derrida's quadrilaterals are part of a continuous "oscillation" between threes and fours, odd and even figures, which runs throughout the story. Dupin lives, for example, "*au troisième, No. 33*," the odd-numbered threes evened by doubling, and the odd third floor in France evened by what we call in England or America the fourth. I would add to Irwin's argument here the problem of how many doubles there are, two or three? Dupin's identity merges with D—'s, but the Minister already has a brother who is *also* both poet and mathematician. A double identity of three is surely a contradiction in terms, or an even odder conception.

Irwin is at pains to show that mere rationality cannot solve mysteries such as this; the more you reflect on it, the more vertiginously its

[1] These "solutions," along with others related to them, are reprinted in *The Purloined Poe*, edited by John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (1988).

[2] THE MYSTERY TO A SOLUTION: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story, by *John T. Irwin*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. $36.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

solutions multiply. He sees it as a distinctive genre invented by Poe in the three Dupin stories, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842), and "The Purloined Letter" (1844). As Irwin defines it, the analytic detective story focuses not merely on the investigation process and all its acts of analysis but on the analysis of those acts of analysis. Such a story invites, or rather necessitates, an investigation of the investigator and his methods. And whoever conducts this investigation must become conscious in turn of his methods, and vulnerable to the "corrections" of a subsequent analyst. Irwin demonstrates again and again, quoting Poe in the opening of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," that analysis itself is "but little susceptible of analysis." Nobody can be self-conscious enough to be detached from self-consciousness. And nobody can propound a sufficiently disinterested mode of analysis, never mind a definitive solution. The distinctive purpose of the analytic detective story, Irwin suggests, is to dramatize its own hermeneutic abysses, aporia, and "oscillations." And its chief means of doing that is not plot or character but what he calls *figuration*: the use of images, metaphors, ciphers and designs that embody the enigmas of self-consciousness. Freed of the illusion that these mysteries are soluble, the reader is invited to investigate what Irwin's title aptly calls "the mystery to a solution."

How then do we proceed with, say, "The Purloined Letter"? Irwin proceeds by turning to the detective stories of Jorge Luis Borges, whom he sees as recovering the puzzles and enigmas of Poe by deliberately re-writing or "doubling" them—exactly one century later—with three stories of his own: "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941), "Death and the Compass" (1942), and "Ibn-Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth" (1949). In Irwin's book Poe and Borges are essentially the *only* practitioners of the analytic detective genre, and he shows how the two constantly mirror one another. Readers familiar with the geometry of "Death and the Compass"—its proliferating three- and four-sided figures, its triangles and rhomboids, pyramids and lozenges—will recognize at once that Borges has determined much of Irwin's reading of Poe. That distinctively Borgesan labyrinth, the straight line as rendered non-negotiable by the paradoxes of Zeno, reappears in Poe, as Irwin reads him. So too do the Borgesan chessboards and mirrors and moments of "vertiginous" discovery or "unanimous" defeat. Both Poe and Borges are fond of learned allusions which conceal important clues, although it's clear that Borges actually knew many more quaint and curious volumes of forgotten lore than Poe did. But Irwin's Poe seems to have read Carl Jung and Otto Rank, Kafka and Lewis Carroll and *The Golden Bough*, so intent is he on proving that the two writers think alike. He even finds biographical resemblances: grandfathers who were military heroes, lifelong mother fixations, extreme sexual diffidence, conspicuous physical debilities, self-consciousness as Southerners.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When Irwin says that Borges "chose to *double* Poe's Dupin stories" (italics mine), he does not really mean it. He is able to show no uncanny identities, no *unheimlich* mirrorings, only selective resemblances. Red Scharlach, the evil genius of "Death and the Compass," designs a clever trap for the cerebral detective Erich Löhnrot but it does not mirror or duplicate any of the clever traps in "The Purloined Letter." Scharlach uses someone else's crime, another murder he commits, and a fake murder to diagram for Löhnrot where a fourth murder will take place—the clever detective's own. No such Oedipal demise occurs in Poe, no such murders, no such blatant irony. That Borges' story is a "reading" of Poe's, at least in some of its features, may well be so; but its plot owes much more to Agatha Christie's *The ABC Murders* (1931). The doubling of detective and criminal, Dupin and D—, may be echoed in the color-coded names Borges uses (Löhnrot means "hidden" + "red" in Swedish; Scharlach means "scarlet" in German), but this is hardly a unique reading of Poe. Conan Doyle recognized it long before Borges by giving Sherlock Holmes his double in the malevolent mathematician Moriarty. Borges even acknowledges that by hybridizing the name Scharlach from "Sherlock" and *A Study in Scarlet.*

Irwin's arguments are frequently more ingenious than persuasive. His claim that "The Garden of Forking Paths" re-writes "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" depends on the notion of reading newspapers. In Poe's story Dupin conducts a tiresome collation of newspaper stories about the murder in order to sift out a solution (not the right one, as it turns out), while in Borges' story a spy in England murders a man named Albert so that newspaper headlines will unwittingly convey a message about the village of Albert in France. True enough, both stories "thematize" reading and detection, emphasizing their reflexivity; but then so too does "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," where newspaper accounts of a case are also studied for their unwitting messages. But that does not fit Irwin's diagram of correspondences: he wants to connect the labyrinthine investigation processes of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" with those figured in "Ibn-Hassan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth." There are certainly rewards in his doing so, notably in seeing Dupin's Theseus-like role in threading the ambiguities and discovering that the critical clue is a certain nail, or *clou* in French, which restores the *clew*, i.e., the ball of yarn used as a guide in a labyrinth. But these parallels do not prove that Borges' labyrinth "doubles" Poe's or is even necessarily a reading of it.

But that hardly matters to Irwin. His whole book shows that he can make a labyrinth out of anything, and produce for it a skein of associations if not a clew. Like Borges' overzealous Löhnrot, he relishes nothing more than a diagram, a figure that will send him on long paper-chases through encyclopedias and dictionaries. On triangles and squares, circles and crosses, polygons and quincunxiae Irwin performs his verbal origami, bisecting here, rotating there, folding

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and mirroring, inverting and everting, to produce a net or an axe, a fatidic number or a swastika, a Minotaur or a Möbius strip. For him quite as much as for Poe, everything is a cipher, and begs to be deciphered. Take for example that much purloined letter D. Irwin shows in rich detail how the letter is connected with a debate about algebraic notation, designated by one Cambridge theorist in 1814 as "pure *d*-ism [modern differential calculus] as opposed to the *dot*-age of the university [old-style dotting or pricking used above a letter]." Poe must have liked the puns on "deism" and "dotage," and very knowingly used the whole idea of a "differential" calculus in his story; in fact Dupin says the Minister D— has "written learnedly" on that subject. Irwin argues convincingly (and at length, detailing Poe's study of mathematics at West Point) for "difference" as an essential meaning of the "overdetermined" letter D. Then he turns the capital D into a delta, the triangular fourth letter of the Greek alphabet, which evokes again "the three/four oscillation" he keeps finding in both Poe and Borges. And as if that were not enough, Irwin reminds us that *deltos* means in Greek "a writing tablet," yet another confirmation of the tale's reflexivity. Overdetermined? Irwin is nothing if not that.

I have failed so far to convey Irwin's full scholarly madness: he has outstripped himself as the crafty reader of duplicities in Faulkner, as the lucid explicator of American hieroglyphics.[3] In *The Mystery to a Solution* he conducts regressive digressions worthy of Tristram Shandy, encyclopedic accumulations worthy of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, extravagant glosses worthy of Charles Kinbote. Roderick Usher would have been pleased by Irwin's laborious, self-destructive queries. Borges would have known at once the book was meant to be a garden of forking paths—one badly in need of weeding. None of these suggests exactly the best model for a book of literary criticism. Harold Bloom has rightly called it "superbly mad."

And yet, and yet. Irwin has lavished attention on Borges and Poe as no other modern critics have done. He has tracked Borges through *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* to discover, on facing pages, the import of "Treviranus" and "Tetragrammaton," key terms in "Death and the Compass." He has unearthed from a casual-seeming allusion in "Ibn-Hassan al-Bokhari" the peculiar significance of Israel Zangwill's *The Big Bow Mystery* (1892). He has located in Sir Thomas Browne the subtle phrasings and "intonations" that Borges once heard. He has explained the queasy moralities of Borges' "foreign culprits," like the German agent Yu T'sun who kills the English sinologist Stephen Albert in "The Garden of Forking Paths." He has discerned the

[3] Irwin's previous books are *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (1975) and *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (1980).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

antagonism of Christian and Jew that Borges tacitly condemns in "Death and the Compass."

Irwin shadows Poe no less attentively, learnedly and originally. Scholars have explicated and annotated Poe for decades, but Irwin is the first to discover that Dupin is modeled on *two* historic figures, both statesmen and mathematicians, both writers: the polymath André Dupin and his brother, the Baron Charles Dupin. Irwin is the first to prove Poe's sophistication in mathematics and show how it pervades "The Purloined Letter." Irwin conducts a breathtaking analysis of the famous moment in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" where Dupin follows the narrator's reverie, and breaks in upon it. Irwin explains—no less brilliantly than Dupin—the buried logic of this seemingly random series of associations, both for the whole story and for Poe personally. One may read Irwin's densely packed 46 chapters just for moments like these, and come away richly rewarded.

But there is more here than that. Despite its excesses and vagaries, *The Mystery to a Solution* is relentless about the subject it investigates: investigation itself. The analytic detective story is a genre important for our time, not just because (as Irwin says in his preface) so many of us are "mental workers"—diagnosticians, psychoanalysts, literary critics—, but because investigation itself is bedevilled by difficulties we might wish to ignore: the tendency of investigators to find what they are looking for; the susceptibility of "facts" to be read in multiple ways; the problem of who has the power to rationalize the "facts" into a "solution"; the desire for closure or quick solution; the likelihood of categorical or unexamined assumptions; the temptations of guilt by association or prejudice; the question of what constitutes evidence; the subjectivity of any "eye-witness" authority; the endless ambiguities of the language we use—or that uses us; the tendency of all investigators from Oedipus to John T. Irwin to end up investigating themselves. Powerfully then Irwin demonstrates how the mysteries of Poe and Borges offer many warnings about precisely these dangers, if we read their fables critically enough, i.e., as self-consciously as Irwin suggests. His study is both an exploration and a critique of modern literary theory, but it is salutary for many other sorts of reader-investigators as well.

That said, I was disappointed by Irwin's blunt dismissal of the rest of the genre. He categorizes Holmes and Poirot as "caricatures," Hammett and Chandler as popular romancers; only Poe and Borges have "epistemological seriousness." Irwin is unaware of how pervasively the genre has raised questions of problematic interpretation and dubious detection, using the very figuration—mirrors, doubles, labyrinths, beasts, ciphers—that he has explicated. He thinks that "the deeper significance of virtually everything" in the Dupin stories was lost until Borges came along, particularly the genre's "Oedipal resonances," which only Borges "fully understood." Irwin grants a pale echo of the Oedipal theme in *The Dain Curse* and *The Big Sleep*, but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

clearly knows nothing of its elaborate and self-conscious use in John D. MacDonald's mysteries, E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case*, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers*, Colin Dexter's *The Dead of Jericho*, and a host of others. The theme is so well recognized nowadays as to be parodied in filmscripts like Robert Towne's *Chinatown* and Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective*.

I was disappointed too that Irwin is uncomfortable with the idea of parody. He takes it to mean merely burlesque or travesty, and cannot see that Borges is a brilliant parodist of Poe, Chesterton, Doyle, and the whole genre they invented. Borges, like Nabokov and other modernists, uses parody to invent something wholly new. Good parody requires astute imitation, and every genre is perpetuated by means of it. Poe was surely a brilliant parodist too of the "ratiocinative" voice that he found in ponderous scholarly disquisition. Irwin seems too often unaware of the parody in his own manner. But he apologizes for that and acknowledges his other limitations in a remarkably graceful exit line chosen from Sir Thomas Browne, who speaks of "making Cables of Cobwebbes and Wildernesses of handsome Groves." Irwin *has* done that indeed, but so have we all.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MARK JARMAN

The Primal Storyteller

In 1981, Robert McDowell and I started a magazine called *The Reaper* which we dedicated to a revival of narrative poetry. We argued that narrative, which other literary forms continued to use effectively, had begun to disappear from poetry. Because it was the form that connected poetry to life as it was lived, it had to be revived. Narrative, we reasoned, provided meaning and made artistic demands that a poet avoided at his peril. If a poet did not have a story to tell, he should not be writing a poem. Our argument had some effect, but of course the renewed interest in narrative poetry was in the air. Others had realized how insular the lyric poem had become, how ineffective it was in communicating anything about life as it is lived. The notion of returning poetry to its roots as a medium of storytelling was catching on. Still, the significance of the story as a form and the way poetry can throw that form into high relief, these were nothing less than avant-garde ideas for their time. They also led to some angry backlash and repudiation from the status quo, echoes of which linger today.

So it is with some satisfaction that I read the following claim by Stephen Jay Gould in *The New York Review of Books* (October 20, 1994):

> . . . we are storytelling creatures and should have been named *Homo narrator* . . . rather than the often inappropriate *Homo sapiens*. The narrative mode comes naturally to us as a style for organizing thoughts and ideas.

And it is with particular interest that I read Bert O. States's new book[1] which confirms Gould's assertion and explores the relation of narrative to the unconscious. States's theory is that narrative is the basic form of literary art because it is rooted in the form of the dream, which itself is a reflection of life both as it is lived and as we desire it to be.

States begins by assuming that dreams are narratives and explains that, as such, the dream "is the narrative form in greatest need of examination." Dreams have been examined very thoroughly in this century, but not to States's satisfaction as literary or ur-literary forms.

[1] DREAMING AND STORYTELLING, by *Bert O. States*. Cornell University Press. $26.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He picks a bone with Freud throughout his book, insisting that dreams are as irreducible to interpretation as any art form and affect our emotions in the same direct yet complicated way. He goes so far as to say that the Freudian censor does not distort dreams to disguise latent material, but that distortion is the means by which dreams express their imaginative meaning. To distort, he claims, is to make art.

A curious issue, however, in States's use of dreams as examples is that those he uses seem remarkably clear, remarkably coherent, remarkably narrative. Despite my predisposition to agree with States's argument, I sometimes wondered as I read if it was not just a bit too neat.

He handles what Freud called the uncanny in his first chapter, "The Problem of Bizarreness." Part of the strangeness of dreams, he says, is that what we dream "loses the status of the imaginary." And yet he also asserts that while dreaming we can imagine anything. By "anything" he probably means that the brain can imagine anything within the dreamer's ken, no matter how it is arranged. I have never dreamed of black holes, for example, and I doubt that Stephen Hawking would dream of my father. So, our brains cannot imagine just anything. Yet this limitation relates to the fact that, as States argues, our dreams are narrative because our lives are narrative. The bizarreness of dream narrative is also due to "the elasticity of fiction." Like a story, a dream can move from scene to scene without any overt or even logical reason. And yet he points out that, unlike a story, dreams "are authorless, unmediated by language, and they unfold intrepidly in a world no different from the waking world with respect to the authenticity of one's experience." While we experience dreams, often as characters within the narrative, we have no sense or are denied a sense of the author's controlling hand, even though that hand is our own. The bizarreness of dreams is due to our *unwilling* suspension of disbelief.

Yet who has not dreamed and said to himself during a truly bizarre, usually frightening episode, this is or is not a dream? To help him make his case, States appeals to the Russian Formalists, Shklovsky in particular, and the theory of defamiliarization or estrangement. Defamiliarization is found, Shklovsky argued, "everywhere form is found." Therefore, dreams are bizarre not because they are formless, but because they are formal. Freud, too, has noted this. The difference between him and States is that States is interested in the form of the dream and not what it conceals.

States is at his very best when dealing with formal theories. In order to devise a way to think about distortion, so as to exclude the censor, he theorizes that "distortion is a form of classification" and has to do with the way the brain stores material. He makes an analogy between this method and the way in a dictionary one encounters totally unlike things in proximity simply because of their similar spellings. Opening

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a dictionary anywhere will offer up surreal juxtapositions like nougat, nought, noumenon. Without distortion, States claims, "the dream would be radically limited in its powers of association." He paraphrases Descartes: "I think, therefore I distort; or, I think, therefore I make metaphors." Thus our memories are stored cheek by jowl in the brain's dictionary, and during the freedom of sleep, the author of dreams discerns likenesses among them that we would ordinarily dismiss.

Along with this process comes a sense that, States says, "dreams do not have beginnings and endings but seem rather to be all middle with occasional crises." To explain the narrative unfolding of a dream, he quotes Jean Luc Godard who said that his films all had a beginning, a middle, and an end, but not necessarily in that order. As for the mood of a dream, whether it be sexy or frightening, images that enter adapt to local conditions, as in natural selection. An aunt who is kindly in real life may, in a frightening dream, be a monster; or you may dream that you are sleeping with your mother, if the dream is about sex.

The reference to natural selection makes me wonder if natural selection is not itself a narrative that explains a process which may be hiding something else. It is possible that the narrative form of a dream may also be a distortion of the censor. States does not address these issues. As long as he keeps his argument on formal grounds, he is eloquent and persuasive, as in this key passage from his second chapter in which he says that dreams are

> the first place stories were ever told—in the dreamwork, the primal storyteller preceding all fiction, the one story mechanism that produces a narrative structure that consciousness not only invents but inhabits at first hand.

The third chapter of the book, entitled "The Master Forms," includes a number of problematic areas. Instead of deferring to Jung, States considers the work of formalists like I.V. Propp and his *Morphology of the Folktale*, to argue that the narrative patterns of dreams follow many of the same patterns as literary narratives. He makes a provocative claim that dreams, while they are "the continuing saga of [our] imaginary life," tend not to be comic, and further, they rarely involve things or people with whom we are happy or about which or whom our emotions are resolved. From this claim he moves to Tolstoy's famous assertion at the beginning of *Anna Karenina*. Since all happy families are alike and need not be written about, States reasons, then happiness "has no narrative and therefore it requires no narrator." Presumably, in States's argument, happiness requires no dreamer, either. But Tolstoy did write about one happy family—the Rostovs in *War and Peace*. And surely we can all recall dreams that made us very happy, that we did not wish to end. As for the comic in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dreams, when she was little my youngest daughter invariably woke up in the morning giggling or laughing. While we may rarely find ourselves laughing in a dream, many a dream is based on the ironies we find in a joke. Again, Freud teaches us this. When States mentions in a footnote that "we do not dream in the style of a Robbe-Grillet novel or in the style of *Finnegans Wake*," though he means to suggest that neither is essentially narrative in form, still exceptions spring to mind. Some dreams are populated by puns embodied in dramatic action or simply by physically represented words. The protagonist of Robbe-Grillet's *The Voyeur* seems exactly like a dreamer caught watching himself in a dream.

Finally, departing from his narrative argument, States describes something he calls "the lyric dream" as "the self speaking to itself." Yet is this not true of every dream? In order to locate the author of the dream, the self behind the self who plans the dream narrative, States ends where Freud began. The primal storyteller is not the dreamwork; it is "desire."

Where States wants to end up is with an answer to his question, "Are dreams more like literature or more like the digestive system?" In his most detailed expression of his theory, he writes,

> The miracle of narrative formation can be explained by no other agency than some variation on the principle of scripted, schematic, or archetypal behavior, which we may think of as the grammar of memory in that it provides the combinational patterns with which memory can condense experience into narrative form. Thus the logic of storytelling is largely a matter of plagiarizing the world of social usage and abuse.

In other words, dreams are more like literature. But considering all he has argued and what he has left incompletely refuted, i.e., Freud's theory of dreams, I would have to say that dreams lie somewhere between literature and digestion. It may very well be that, as States says, "in the dream we are virtually at the site of pure creativity, where the associative process is not hampered by matters of comprehensibility or conceptuality." But for that very reason, we are not at the site where art is made or, I would venture, even in a totally analogous realm.

States admits early on in his book that our own dreams are rarely of much or any interest to others. W. H. Auden is on record as saying dismissively, "The subconscious is fundamentally boring." What the waking author does with the plagiarized world and what the primal storyteller does are, in the end, two very different things. When States suggests that a work of narrative art, poem or novel or short story, is its own interpretation, I am with him. But when he concludes that the same is true for the dream, I have to wonder. For if the primal storyteller, the author of dreams, the force that plans the narrative, is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

also desire, then whatever it is that desire wants is embodied in the dream and concealed there. We are back at Freud's thesis that the dream is the fulfillment of a wish, and that wish may be distorted in the dreamwork because of its latent power, even its fearsomeness.

Perhaps Freud and States come closest when we think of that part of the dream Freud called its "navel," a part connected to the mystery of dreaming itself. States's formal argument may be taken as an explanation of that mystery. A formalist to the end, he provides a chart for his idea of how the dream becomes art: "life experience (desire)—dream—day dream—fiction and art." And he also creates a comparative list of how different critical methodologies—psychoanalytic, semiotic, phenomenological, structural, and deconstructive—would approach the narrative structure of dreams. In contrast to these critical approaches, he concludes that the purpose of dreams and stories is "not to produce meanings." As much as I am gratified by his thinking, I find myself changing from *Homo narrator* back to *Homo sapiens*, man who has and wishes to acquire knowledge. I want to know what it all means. That desire to know seems as primal as the desire to tell stories.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus relates his parables to a group of individuals who were not exactly selected for their imaginative abilities. Often when he tells them a story, they counter, "What do you mean?" And just as often he is reduced to telling them, in order to satisfy their unimaginative, literal-minded desire to know. But of course, it is always with another story.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

R. S. GWYNN

Make the World Cohere

AS IF TO CONFIRM THE CLASSICAL PROPORTIONS one usually associates with Thom Gunn's work, his *Collected Poems*[1] appeared in his sixty-fifth year, exactly four decades after the publication of his first book. Few, I suspect, would disagree that Gunn is an important poet, but few would deny that he is also an extremely problematic one who, to take a page from the contemporary critical lexicon, succeeded for many years in being *marginalized* primarily by dint of his own hard efforts. If Gunn has of late found himself somewhat nearer the center of American poetry, his strategy, if it may be so termed, has been to "plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide" until the huge world came round to him, to borrow a phrase from an equally problematic predecessor. It is an ironic triumph, to be sure, but not without some elements of grandeur.

A former student of F. R. Leavis at Cambridge and one of the young poets identified as part of the Movement (which he has long denied ever existed except in the fancy of literary journalists), he left England shortly after the appearance of his first book to study with the eccentric Yvor Winters at Stanford. (When Donald Hall arrived at about the same time, Winters greeted him with "Do you realize that you will be ridiculed, the rest of your life, for having studied a year with me?") He has remained in California since, part of the English colony which the late Christopher Isherwood served as permanently tanned honorary consul. Gunn arrived in San Francisco the year before the legendary Six Gallery reading that introduced Ginsberg's "Howl," but surrounded, first, by the Beats and, later, by untidy partisans of succeeding countercultures, he has cheerfully attended the long party but retained his English manners and meters, turning out graceful strophes on the one hand about conventional subjects and on the other about Harleys, acid trips, the Manson family, and the bathhouse scene. His early work is so filled with warriors, criminals, and bikers that many readers (my younger self and a motorcycle-enthralled fellow poet among them) missed the mark entirely, comically underestimating the degree of attraction this leather-clad machismo held for Gunn. He has written as an openly gay poet since the mid-seventies when, he says in *Shelf Life*, a recent collection of his prose, "I had been granted a new subject matter, one

[1] COLLECTED POEMS, by *Thom Gunn*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $35.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which would have been unpublishable probably ten years before and certainly twenty years before," still sounding after two decades a bit awed by the magnitude of the gift. But unlike most homosexual poets, he seems to have no polemical ax to grind unless what he calls a "visionary carnal politics," a Blakean religion of wisdom through excess, can be so termed. As he says in an uncollected quatrain, with significant emphasis on the final word:

> There are many different varieties of New Jerusalem,
> Political, pharmaceutical—I've visited most of them.
> But of all the embodiments ever built, I'd only return to one,
> For the sexual New Jerusalem was by far the greatest fun.

However, these adventures in the homoerotic paradise have often been recounted with such courtly decorum that it is not difficult to imagine him, at the conclusion of one of the numerous one-shot sexual encounters he alludes to, turning to his partner and saying politely, "Thank you *so* much." It is only lately, when he writes about the AIDS crisis without self-pity or finger-pointing at the expected culprits or, indeed, without even mentioning the disease by name, that he has managed to produce some of the finest elegiac poetry in recent memory. This fellow has not assiduously courted the outlaw mystique for nothing; of young Elvis the young Gunn once observed admiringly, "He turns revolt into a style."

Any retrospective reading of a poet's work is going to be colored by what we know of his or her later stages of development. Thus, it would be disingenuous to claim that an early Gunn poem like "Carnal Knowledge," which begins with "Even in bed I pose" and turns on a refrain of "You know I know you know I know you know," can now be read in any light other than as sexual allegory. The same could be said for the oddly gendered "La Prisonnière" ("Now I will shut you in a box / With massive sides and a lid that locks") or the famous "On the Move," in which "Tradition and the Individual Talent" crosses paths with *Scorpio Rising*:

> On motorcycles, up the road, they come:
> Small, black, as flies hanging in heat, the Boys,
> Until the distance throws them forth, their hum
> Bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh.
> In goggled, donned impersonality,
> In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,
> They strap in doubt—by hiding it, robust—
> And almost hear a meaning in their noise.

The rhetorical bravado, which may have originally been part of a strategy of circumspection, no longer dissembles; it should be clear enough what these oxymoronic angels represent for Gunn:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> One joins the movement in a valueless world,
> Choosing it, till, both hurler and the hurled,
> One moves as well, always toward, toward.

Years later, "In Time of Plague," the nameless leather boys are reincarnated, this time wearing the casual togs of Gunn's mature style:

> Who are these two, these fiercely attractive men
> who want to stick their needle in my arm?
> They tell me they are called Brad and John,
> one from here, one from Denver, sitting the same
> on the bench as they talk to me,
> their legs spread apart, their eyes attentive.
> I love their daring, their looks, their jargon,
> and what they have in mind.

Eros and Thanatos, hand in leather glove. "I am confused / confused to be attracted / by, in effect, my own annihilation," he says here, as if he needed a reminder that even from the first he had praised continually the kinds of "toughs . . . who would not play with Stephen Spender." Caution is not his forte, as he relates in the hilarious parable of the child who has heard that masturbating one hundred times has fatal consequences:

> Fuck it
> it's worth dying for,
>
> and half an hour later
> the score rose from 99 to 105.

Still, there is much more variety in Gunn's work than variations on the sexual theme. If his most recent task, for obvious reasons, has been to commemorate the Fall, at less urgent moments, he can turn a wicked literary epigram, as in "Jamesian":

> Their relationship consisted
> In discussing if it existed.

Or "Nothing Unusual about Marcel Proust":

> All are unmasked as perverts sooner or later,
> With a notable exception—the narrator.

Even though Winters condemned much of his post-Stanford work as "simply journalistic," one cannot underestimate the degree to which journalism has blurred the edges of several literary genres in the years since Gunn read his first *Examiner*. An earlier master, Isherwood, also

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

knew how to close the distance between seer and seen. Of *Goodbye to Berlin* (which, significantly, was dramatized as *I Am a Camera*), Gunn writes, ". . . the narrator has throughout been at the same time separated from his surroundings and identified with them. His degree of separation and his degree of identification have been the great secret subject of the Berlin stories." The poet who was "mad about Keats . . . at fourteen" clearly recognizes negative capability when he sees it; it ultimately becomes Gunn's strongest poetic resource. In this regard I think of such successful forays in portraiture as "In the Tank" (a felon), "The Sand Man" (a homeless beach bum), and the memorable "From the Wave," in which the uneven lines deftly imitate the surfers' difficult equilibrium:

> Late as they can, they slice the face
> In timed procession:
> Balance is triumph in this place,
> Triumph possession.
>
> The mindless heave of which they rode
> A fluid shelf
> Breaks as they leave it, falls and, slowed,
> Loses itself.

In "The Cherry Tree," one of Gunn's most admired but least typical poems, he sinks himself in his subject, managing to capture what Whitman called the "procreant urge" from the inside out:

> But there's something going on
> in those twisted brown limbs,
> it starts as a need
> and it takes over, a need
> to push
> push outward
> from the centre, to
> bring what is not
> from what is, pushing
> till at the tips of the push
> something comes about

When I mentioned to a friend that I was writing about Gunn, he remarked, "Yes, his pen always seems to stop a couple of inches above the paper," referring, I suppose to the chilly aura of self-willed distance that pervades the early and middle work. But in his most recent poems, those collected in the much honored *The Man with Night Sweats*, "The friends surrounding me grow sick, grow thin, / And drop away," and the "degree of separation" that has been the source of most of the reservations one has had about his poetry is at last

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

counterpoised by an equivalent "degree of identification." The result is a fine accord in which feeling is held in restraint yet not diminished by the poet's formal control. "Terminal" describes the agonizing attempt of one of these friends to maintain some shred of final dignity while another helps him to do so. Its single periodic sentence forms a strophe that weaves through six pairs of heroic couplets with the majestic progress of a Homeric simile. It is too moving to be quoted in less than its entirety:

> The eight years difference in age seems now
> Disparity so wide between the two
> That when I see the man who armoured stood
> Resistant to all help however good
> Now helped through day itself, eased into chairs,
> Or else led step by step down the long stairs
> With firm and gentle guidance by his friend,
> Who loves him, through each effort to descend,
> Each wavering, each attempt made to complete
> An arc of movement and bring down the feet
> As if with that spare strength he used to enjoy,
> I think of Oedipus, old, led by a boy.

With lines like these Thom Gunn completes an "arc of movement" which, unlike the dramatic curve of most poetic careers, has attained its full magnitude only in the *exodos*.

Jorie Graham's *Materialism*[2] represents a significant advance, if that is the exact word, over her preceding collection, published in 1991. At the time I thought that it would be quite an accomplishment for anyone to write a more self-indulgent book than *Region of Unlikeness*, with its two pages of epigraphs from Augustine, Heidegger, the Bible, and Melville, and pretentious titles like "Fission," "The Tree of Knowledge," or "The Phase After History." At the conclusion of the last-named of these, which managed to entomb the potentially powerful story of Stuart, a suicidal student, underneath an avalanche of snippets from *Macbeth* and double-talk from *The Portable Heidegger*, I felt like someone who, if only for poor Stuart's sake, has cried out, "Is there a doctor in the house?" but found, *hélas*, that the only one available is Dr. *Perloff*.

That achievement notwithstanding, the poet has truly exceeded herself in *Materialism*. With two and *a half* pages of epigraphs and 143 pages laden (or *leaden*, I am tempted to say) with long passages—sometimes reassembled into centos, sometimes edited into what Graham calls "adaptations," sometimes simply reprinted—from Wittgenstein, Audubon, Whitman, Stanislavsky, Brecht, and others, *Materialism* represents a type of poetry that, for lack of a better term,

[2] MATERIALISM, by *Jorie Graham*. The Ecco Press. $22.00.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

might be labeled the *farrago.* Why a poet would want to take such a giant leap backward into such exhausted high modernist modes is a puzzle. At least Pound and Eliot had an ideology or mythic subtext to hang their washing on; with Graham it's hold the objective, heavy on the correlative, damn the torpedoes and full speed astern. With no discernible ideas of her own and situations that are the familiar by-products of the suburban mundane, she serves up, with no ascertainable irony, the ludicrous incongruity of a title like "The Dream of the Unified Field" hung on the slender peg of an opening straight out of the warmfuzzyspace of *thirtysomething:*

> On my way to bring you the leotard
> you forgot to include in your overnight bag,
> the snow started coming down harder.
> I watched each gathering of leafy flakes
> melt round my footfall.

In itself, there is nothing wrong with this; books of contemporary poetry are full of similarly homey vignettes (though Graham's reference to her daughter's costume as "your tiny dream" is a bit much). But few poets would persist in the folly for eight pages, describing how falling snowflakes "define . . . the passaging through from / the-other-than- / human," dragging in an ominous flock of starlings and a single emblematic crow whose cry rises from "inside the constant repatterning of a thing not nervous yet / not ever / still—but not uncertain" (say *what*?) and then seguing to an afternoon ballet class led by "Madame Sakaroff, at Stalingrad" at which the speaker (the poet or some unidentified other?—"I was eight") pirouettes a participle—"I had seen her (from the curtain) / (having forgotten I was there)"; observes Madame dancing alone before a mirror; performs a *grand jeté* back to the present, where, like forlorn Stella Dallas outside in the storm, she gazes in on her daughter:

> Child,
> what should I know
> to save you that I do not know, hands on this
> windowpane?—

ending, for some imaginary reason out of mind, with a passage from the diary of Christopher Columbus describing the capture and release of an Indian maiden who is "wearing a little piece of / gold on her nose"—O Irony! O Heavy Portent! Oh my.

With titles like "Manifest Destiny" or "Doctrine of Original Sin" (a long passage from Jonathan Edwards that is not about original sin at all) sandwiched between, among, and around slices of Columbus' diary, Audubon's impassive descriptions of the slaughter of native species, and what must be a misquotation from McGuffey's reader

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

("Thy *lookest from thy throne* in the clouds / and *laugh'st* at the storm"). *Materialism* seems to be slouching towards some grand indictment of American history. But to what end? The publisher's press release rounds up the usual suspects: "Graham speaks boldly as a late-twentieth century woman to both the 'otherness' of the material world, and the 'otherness' of the great male voices of Western Culture, many of whose emissaries—Sir Francis Bacon, da Vinci, Wittgenstein, Dante, Brecht, Plato, Audubon, Whitman, Marx, Buson, Flaubert—speak for themselves. *Materialism* evolves as a dramatic encounter between Graham's voice and its own desires, fears and assumptions of the male voice of Western Culture. What we receive is a vivid fabric of voices addressing and interrupting each other—overriding each other—and the poet struggling between the crowding historicism and the deafening solitude of the self's echo." For this relief, much thanks, but, to put it crudely, baloney—no matter how you slice it—is still baloney. Graham may have miraculously found a publicist equal to her poetry, but I doubt that she will find a like number of readers.

It is with somewhat greater relief that I turn, in closing, to a poet who opens with lines like these:

> By age forty we all have
> the face we deserve,
> someone wrote. Do I deserve
> mine at fifty-three?
> Start with the nose—
> bulbous, red as Clarabel's;
> doubtless too many Dewars.

Breakdown Lane[3] follows Robert Phillips' most recent book by eight years, and it is good to see him back in the saddle again with, among other delights, a bemused meditation ("Drive Friendly") on the etiquette of driving in his brave new Texas landscape. Born in 1938, he belongs to this century's second "middle generation" (the first was the ill-starred group born between the rock of Roethke and the hard place of Lowell) whose members were not old enough to make their mark in the big postwar anthologies and not young enough to be included in the largest generational gathering of recent years, the Smith-Bottoms anthology of a decade ago. As such, Phillips and several other poets of the same generation and temper—Maxine Kumin, Miller Williams, and George Garrett are several who come readily to mind—have produced their selected volumes and have won their fair share of prizes and honors without ever quite attracting a deserved amount of attention from academic critics.

[3] BREAKDOWN LANE, by *Robert Phillips*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. $30.00; $12.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But the reason for this benign neglect may not just be an accident of birth; Phillips, with his autobiographic subjects (his selected poems is titled *Personal Accounts*) and his offhand wit, seems to hug the center stripe so closely that one is likely to forget that a contemporary poet who speaks of a "breakdown" in his title poem may not merely be talking about automotive maintenance:

> No one stops,
> I don't want them to, it's my breakdown,
> I earned it, I'll just stagger
> toward the horizon, not
>
> knowing what's ahead, whether there is
> a finish line, or why I am crying
> on the shoulder.

Before we have time to groan sufficiently at that last line, we are in the middle of a love poem describing how the younger poet was "cut in two" by the conflict between what he desired and what he felt destined to settle for:

> The split opened my chest
> like a chrysalis, a part
> neat in the hair.
> Some guillotine slammed
> through skull, neck, cage,
> spine, pelvis, behind—
> like a butcher splits
> a chicken breast.

There is real pain here, to be sure, but pain in our postconfessional age is a devalued currency; it takes the anti-Petrarchan chop of that final simile to make it worth something. Like Woody Allen, Phillips is a master of the neatly timed anticlimax, reminding us, here and elsewhere, that for every Young Werther there is also a Young Robert who has the good fortune to find a partner with enough wit to say, "You've *got* to pull yourself / together," and who still possesses sufficient presence of mind to make the enjambment in the right place.

Robert Phillips has never met a pun or a good story he didn't want to take home with him, and his store of literary gab is immense: in an elegy for Howard Moss he mourns the man yet cannily observes of the editor that

> you seemed unaware of the role you played—
> fawning of would-be poet sycophants,
> dislike of thousands of rejectees, un-
> discerned. You died not knowing who you were.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Still, I remain most impressed here with a quality I had not noticed before in Phillips' poetry, how tender his love poetry can be and how it derives that quality, oddly enough, from the play of wit. In one poem he flirts with one inconsequential trope before embracing another that precisely captures the blood-rush of desire: "Your walk has feet like prosody. / As you enter a room, I come aware— / the shudder of the hound scenting the hare." Since the time of the Metaphysical poets, love's conceits have only sporadically provided occasion for much more than academic exercises in violent yoking, but this does not deter Phillips from giving it the old college try. In "The Stone Crab: A Love Poem," he begins with the unpromising news that "Joe's serves approximately 1000 pounds of crab claws each day," noting that "One giant claw / is his claim to fame, and we claim it, // more than once." Eventually each crab "replaces // an entire appendage as you or I / grow a nail," but that too is harvested in its time: "*snap!* it too / is twigged off, the cripple dropped // back into treachery." One would not expect much of an epiphany about love to come from all this crustacean lore, but it does, memorably:

> How many losses
> can he endure? Well,
>
> his shell is hard, the sea is wide.
> Something vital broken off, he doesn't
> nurse the wound; develops something new.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Letter to the Editors

Dear Editors:

In his essay "Matters of Language" in the Autumn 1994 issue of the *Hudson*, Hayden Carruth writes as follows:

> Allen Ginsberg cares as much for language, and uses it with as much deliberate concern, as did Elizabeth Bishop or Robert Lowell.
>
> If you are male your attitude toward language is analogous to your love of women, and vice versa.

Yes—unless you're a male who shares Ginsberg's sexual orientation, or a woman who shares Bishop's.

How ironic that in an essay celebrating extreme sensitivity to precision of verbal expression—a sensitivity that I, for one, applaud—Carruth can commit such a colossal act of insensitivity and imprecision as to follow a reference to Ginsberg and Bishop with a statement that pretends their sexual orientation doesn't even exist. All that Carruth needed to do was to add an adjective: "If you are a *heterosexual* male . . ."

New York, New York Bruce Bawer

Hayden Carruth replies:

Clearly I was contrasting Ginsberg with Bishop and Lowell solely in terms of the verbal styles of their poetry, using them as incidental examples. In the context their sexual orientation actually doesn't exist. Clearly also my piece was autobiographical and personal; I was referring throughout to myself. In this case at least, I believe offense is in the eye of the beholder.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN GREENING,* a native Londoner, now lives near Cambridge, England. Twice winner in the Arvon international poetry competition, his most recent collection of poetry is *The Tutankhamun Variations* (Bloodaxe/Dufour Editions). . . . BRUCE BAWER's book *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* has been published in paperback by Touchstone/Simon & Schuster; *Prophets and Professors*, his collection of essays on modern poetry, is forthcoming from Story Line Press. . . . A new book of JOSEPH EPSTEIN's familiar essays, *With My Trousers Rolled*, will soon be published by W.W. Norton. . . . JOHN HAINES' most recent book is *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer, Collected Poems.* He is preparing a collection of essays to be published by Graywolf Press this coming fall. . . . NINA BOGIN lives in eastern France and works as a translator. Her book of poems, *In the North*, was published by Graywolf in 1989. . . . MAIRI MacINNES* lives in the North Riding of Yorkshire. Her last book of poems was *Elsewhere & Back* (Bloodaxe, 1993). . . . CARL PFLUGER is writing a book (tentative title: "Arguing Nature") exploring some of the religious and philosophical dimensions of environmentalism and related movements. . . . D. NURKSE's* most recent book, *Voices over Water*, was published in 1993. . . . WILLIAM BAER,* a 1994 recipient of an NEA Creative Writing Grant, is the editor of *The Formalist*. . . . SUZANNE RHODENBAUGH is a poet and essayist now living in Richmond, Virginia.

BARBARA HELFGOTT HYETT's* new book on endangered wildlife of North America is forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press. . . . JIM HENLEY,* a Maryland State Arts Council grant winner, has published poems in various U.S. and U.K. magazines. . . . *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* by JOHN LOUGHERY is due out from Henry Holt this summer. . . . BERT CARDULLO has translations of André Bazin's film criticism forthcoming in *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Literature/Film Quarterly*, and was recently awarded a fellowship by the University of Michigan to do research on Vittorio De Sica this summer in Rome. . . . JAMES W. TUTTLETON is the author of *The Novel of Manners in America* (W.W. Norton, 1974) and the co-editor (with Kristin O. Lauer and Margaret Murray) of *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). . . . DEAN FLOWER is a professor of English at Smith College. . . . MARK JARMAN's latest collection of poems, *Questions for Ecclesiastes*, is forthcoming this year from David R. Godine. During the summer of 1995 he will direct Vanderbilt University's Humanities-in-London seminars.

**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

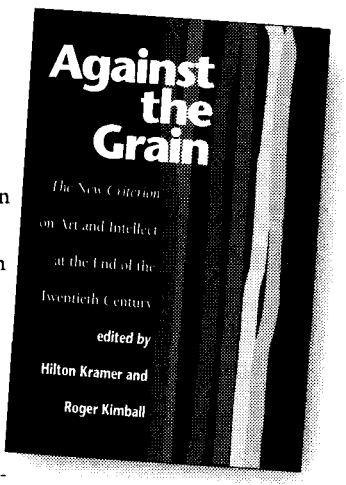
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A cornucopia of brilliant criticism from the pages of *The New Criterion*

Against the Grain

The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century

edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball



"As a critical periodical *The New Criterion* is probably more consistently worth reading than any other magazine in English."—Julian Symons, *Times Literary Supplement*

Against the Grain brings together more than forty incisive essays from the magazine that has emerged as the foremost voice of critical dissent in the culture wars. The writings challenge radical orthodoxies on a wide range of controversial subjects, from the philosophy of Michel Foucault to the apocalyptic kitsch of Anselm Kiefer, from the scandals of political correctness and multiculturalism to the state of Latin American literature and politics. Samuel Lipman writes on the future of classical music, Hilton Kramer on the plight of today's art museum, Joseph Epstein on the poet C. P. Cavafy, and Roger Kimball on the treason of the intellectuals.

The book includes pieces by Guy Davenport on Gertrude Stein, John Simon on Vladimir Nabokov, Donald Lyons on *Angels in America*, Richard Vine on Jean Baudrillard, Maurice Cowling on Raymond Williams, and H. J. Kaplan on Jean Genet. There are thoughtful reevaluations of such important cultural figures as T. E. Lawrence, Henry James, Harold Laski, A. E. Housman, Willem de Kooning, Frederick Douglass, and Philip Larkin. And much more.

Written with wit, clarity, and fierce independence, *Against the Grain* is a major contribution to sanity and common sense on the most contentious cultural issues of the day.

Just published, $35 hardcover, $16.95 paperback

Ivan R. Dee, Publisher
1332 North Halsted Street, Chicago 60622
At your bookseller, or order toll free 1-800-634-0226 with a major credit card.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

IN THIS ISSUE:

[A] self-righteous victimization rhetoric pervades the literary culture. It's become routine for some writers to refer to their group identity, and to those who share that identity, in ways that make them sound not like self-respecting artists (or like responsible citizens) but like cynical politicians canvassing for votes. Instead of challenging people both inside and outside their various identity groups to rise above their narrow, comfortable views of others and of themselves, and to embrace a vision of a more equitable society, they flatter those who share their identity-group labels, telling them what they want to hear (and nothing they haven't heard before) about their victimization . . .

—Bruce Bawer, "Violated by Ideas: Reflections on Literature in an Age of Identity Politics," p. 19.

Miss Bishop came of age before the universities had so badly colonized and bollixed up literature into little ethnic and gender subgroups. She grew up admiring the last generation of poets who didn't earn their livelihood in universities: Stevens, Eliot, Marianne Moore, and Robert Frost—non-blue-jean-wearing, which is to say altogether adult, poets. She believed that writers were chiefly of two kinds: good and bad. She knew, in her heart she knew, how difficult it was to be really good.

—Joseph Epstein, "Elizabeth Bishop: Never a Bridesmaid," p. 34.

So Saul . . . lost the kingship of Israel because he had withheld the human sacrifice which Yahweh, the god of Israel, expected as his due after a war. . . . In this refusal Samuel sees only greed; but perhaps we should pause for a modest encomium on King Saul, who dared to refuse this service to a bloodthirsty god . . .

—Carl Pfluger, "Progress, Irony and Human Sacrifice," p. 67.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED